天地無用！魎皇鬼

千客万来編　愛のヘクサグラム

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Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki

A Flood of Customers: Love's Hexagram

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Novel 3

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"Happy New Year~!"

"Happy New Year~!" A glamorous quintet of voices echoed. The time was New Year’s, and the place was the guest room of the Masaki household.

"O-oh... Happy New Year..." Even though it was New Year's morning, Tenchi was in his usual work clothes. He stood there frozen with a strained smile, completely overwhelmed by the beautiful women lined up before him like a cluster of shining stars, all dressed in elegant long-sleeved furisode kimonos.

Starting from the left, first was Ayeka Masaki. She was the First Princess of the Juraian Royal Family from the planet Jurai, located somewhere in space. She was a Japanese-style beauty who saw herself (and was seen by others) as a perfect princess, though everyone knew all too well that her personality became terrifying when she was driven to her wit's end.

Second was Sasami Masaki. Also a Second Princess of the Juraian Royal Family. She was Ayeka's younger sister and the only one in the house with practical talents—namely, general housework. She was cute, reliable, and smart.

Third was Ryoko. A former mummy. Or rather, the demon of the shrine. Or rather, a former cyber-marionette who boasted high combat ability and intelligence. However, in these peaceful times, she had no use for them. Some said that her abilities—passing through walls, flying, creating demon blades, or summoning spirits—were simply a nuisance. Her personality was surprisingly innocent.

Fourth was Mihoshi. A top-class detective from the Galaxy Police. She was a legendary officer whose number of resolved cases, destroyed buildings, total bill amounts, and even the number of complaint letters were all top-tier, yet she herself never thought about anything. Even now, she was lightheartedly tending to her split ends.

And finally, Washu. The greatest genius scientist in the history of the Science Academy. Her specialty was biotechnology. She was the professor of the late Kagato and the creator of Ryoko. She appeared to be a child at first glance, but she was actually the eldest of the five (presumably). As for her personality... well, one could mostly imagine what it was like.

The reason these five women—all beauties of marriageable age—had gathered at Tenchi's home, the Masaki household, involved reasons deeper than space itself... Those who have seen *Tenchi Muyo!* Volumes 1 through 6 likely know the details well, but since there might be some who happen not to know, it’s time for the usual "The Story Thus Far" segment. Those who know can feel free to skip ahead.

Exactly half a year ago... Tenchi Masaki, a first-year student at Okayama East High School, had come to the Masaki Shrine where his grandfather lived to undergo martial arts training, despite it being summer vacation.

That was the official story, but in reality, he spent his days waking up at six in the morning to do farm work, help with chores, and act as a general handyman for his grandfather at the shrine. He led quite a grueling life, having to fit in martial arts practice in between.

In a shrine deep in the mountains, there were no cute girls for Tenchi to socialize with. Realizing he had to find his own entertainment, Tenchi’s interest turned elsewhere. Specifically, toward the "shrine that sealed a demon" and the "sacred sword said to have sealed the demon’s power," both of which existed as legends at the Masaki Shrine.

Now, Tenchi’s fate changed abruptly after he accidentally awakened the mummy sleeping in that shrine. As summer passed and Tenchi returned to school, a seventeen-year-old girl with supernatural powers appeared before him—it was Ryoko, the very mummy from the shrine. She was the first.

Ryoko followed Tenchi around like a chick following its mother, claiming that a terrifying person was coming and begging him to run away with her. Before long, a giant spaceship appeared in the sky above Tenchi’s house. It was the *Ryu-Oh*, a ship piloted by Ayeka, the First Princess of the Juraian Royal Family. A sudden artillery battle broke out. Ryoko summoned her own ship, *Ryo-Ohki*, and tried to escape with Tenchi, but as a result, both the *Ryu-Oh* and *Ryo-Ohki*

crashed into a pond near the Masaki Shrine and were heavily damaged. Princess Ayeka and her younger sister Sasami were left with nowhere to go and, albeit reluctantly, became freeloaders at the Masaki house. They were the second and third.

As for why things turned out this way, it was quickest to ask the individuals themselves.

"Back when I was a space pirate, I heard the Juraian Royal Family had an amazing treasure called the Tenchi Sword. When I went to 'borrow' it, this guy named Yosho—Ayeka's older brother—showed up. I was chased and chased until I finally escaped to Earth. There, my powers were sealed by the Tenchi Sword, and that was it for seven hundred years. Finally, Tenchi came and woke me up. That's why Tenchi belongs to me." (Ryoko)

"Yosho is my half-brother, but he is also my fiancé. The fact that my brother went missing and the fact that I cannot get married is all Ryoko's fault. However, I am truly grateful to Tenchi-sama. He comforted me when I was sinking into sorrow from the shock. Tenchi-sama is strong and kind, and surely he will protect me, as I have no one else to turn to, right?" (Ayeka)

After this, the shocking fact was revealed that Ayeka's brother, Yosho, was actually Tenchi's grandfather, Katsuhito Masaki. By that time, however, the love triangle between Tenchi, Ayeka, and Ryoko was firmly established. Well, since the young and handsome fiancé had turned into a complete old man, it couldn't be helped. Still, people from Jurai certainly lived a long time. But setting that aside...

Another unusual guest appeared at the Masaki house. It was Mihoshi, a detective from the Galaxy Police who was pursuing a heinous criminal scientist named Kagato. It turned out that Kagato was after the Tenchi Sword. She was the fourth.

Finally, Kagato made his appearance! Kagato's ship, the *Soja*, and the combined *Ryu-Oh* and *Ryo-Ohki* faced off across the great ocean of stars. On one side was a massive, heavy-duty super-battleship. On the other was a lightweight mobile craft where Ryo-Ohki, having transformed into a computer, served as the ship's brain.

The *Soja's* main cannon pierced the *Ryu-Oh*! Tenchi was in danger... well, a lot happened after that (an artillery battle, Ayeka's chastity being in peril, Tenchi

appearing at the "just-in-time" moment after supposedly dying)... and Tenchi brilliantly defeated Kagato. During that time, they picked up the genius scientist Washu, who was said to be Ryoko’s creator. She was the fifth.

Everyone returned home together, and the story was supposed to end happily ever after, but...

Whew... that was tiring. The reader must be tired too, right? It really is faster just to watch it... let's just casually emphasize that point. Anyway.

"Tenchi! Why are you standing there like that! Hurry up and come sit down!" The voice of his grandfather—Katsuhito Masaki, also known as Yosho Masaki—rang out.

"Wow, Tenchi! I haven't seen a New Year's this celebratory since I got married." That was Tenchi’s father, Nobuyuki Masaki.

Flowers were arranged in the alcove, kagami mochi was displayed, and tiers of osechi boxes were already lined up on the sturdy low table. Everything was perfectly set for New Year's. The seating arrangement featured the grandfather at the head of the table, the father, Sasami, and Washu on the left. On the right were Ayeka, a gap, and then Ryoko and Mihoshi.

Everyone was dressed in formal attire. The five women were in brilliant furisode kimonos—where they had procured them was a mystery—and the sight was so radiant that even someone who wasn't Urashima Taro would have been tempted to mutter about it. As the saying went, it was a beauty beyond description.

"Tenchi-sama, shall I try to guess what you are thinking?" Ayeka spoke up bashfully. "You must be surprised because we are dressed like this. We decided back when we went shopping that we were going to surprise you, Tenchi-sama. I am so happy. Looking at your face, I can tell well enough even without you saying a word. Tell me, we look beautiful, don't we?"

"In your case, it’s just the kimono." Fortunately, Ryoko’s mutter did not seem to reach the ears of the ecstatic Ayeka.

Tenchi, still overwhelmed by the scenery that looked like a formal kimono showroom, shifted his gaze to the space between Ayeka and Ryoko, which was

exactly large enough for one person. *Does that mean they want me to sit there?* Ayeka and Ryoko had not made eye contact even once for some time now. *How fierce a struggle must there have been to decide this seating arrangement?* Tenchi instinctively looked at his father's face, seeking help. A smirking "You lucky dog" grin was returned to him. *This is hopeless,* Tenchi thought. Just then:

"Now, Tenchi-sama." Ayeka brushed the dust off the cushion next to her. Not that there was actually any dust on it; it was simply a statement of intent.

"Come on, Tenchi." Ryoko shook her sake cup impatiently. Beside her, Mihoshi—having misunderstood something—was standing by while clutching a bottle of Western liquor.

"The kimonos... they suit you..." Tenchi murmured to no one in particular, sighing inwardly. *I guess going back to my bed on the second floor isn't an option. Probably...*

Five minutes later, Tenchi's cup was being filled endlessly with spiced New Year's sake, and in the gaps between drinks, various dishes were being carried to his mouth. Tenchi's chopsticks were still resting untouched on the chopstick holder.

"T-that's enough, Ayeka-san. I'll do it myself..."

"Oh, please don't say that. I made this myself. How is it?" Ayeka replied with a look of supreme happiness as she carried black beans to Tenchi's mouth one by one.

"You made this too? Wow, you're quite good at it."

"Oh, it was nothing... ho ho ho." For some reason, Ayeka seemed flustered.

"Tenchi, you'll get a stomachache if you eat that stuff. A man needs this instead. Here, drink it all in one go!" A teacup filled to the brim with sake was thrust in front of him, and at the same time, Ryoko's equally happy face peered into Tenchi's.

"Tenchi-sama! You must not listen to what a woman like that says. In the first place, you will ruin your health if you drink that much," Ayeka protested.

"Shut up, already. Your 'playing the wife' act makes me sick!" Ryoko shot back.

Ayeka's expression hardened at Ryoko's verbal abuse. "My! What is wrong with serving the man who will one day become my husband? You are the one who should keep your filthy mouth shut!"

"Oh? Look at you, getting all worked up on your own. Tenchi is mine. I am Tenchi's. It was decided the moment we met. Right, Tenchi?"

"Eh?..."

Being suddenly put on the spot in a situation like this, there was no way he could possibly give an answer.

"That is what one calls a self-serving remark! Look at Tenchi-sama's face. Can you not see that he is troubled? No matter how indecisive... I mean, how kind Tenchi-sama is, there is a limit to how much you can take advantage of him!"

Having been told that much, Ryoko's expression finally shifted. "Ayeka, you... I've been sitting here listening to you spout whatever you want, so why don't we go outside and settle this once and for all!"

Suddenly, Ryoko's hand reached out over Tenchi's head and grabbed Ayeka by the collar. The front of her formal kimono flew open, revealing skin as white as snow.

"Ah..."

Tenchi's gaze and Ayeka's gaze fell upon the same spot at the same time. A supple curve tracing a delicate line vanished into the shadows of her under-robe.

Tenchi instinctively caught his breath, while Ayeka's ears turned red in an instant. She violently pulled her collar back together and glared at Ryoko with enough intensity to kill.

"Let go of me! You violent woman!"

"What did you say?! If this is violence, then what do you call the way you talk? You do nothing but complain about everything I do. Does your planet not have the word 'friendship'?"

"One does not use such words when dealing with a monster!"

"A monster? Ayeka, you... is that any way to talk to someone you fought alongside?"

"That was then, and this is now. The future of the Juraian Royal Family depends on my marriage! No matter who the opponent is, I will not hand Tenchi-sama over!"

"Tenchi isn't an object! He's my life. You, are you trying to take my life away too?"

"Don't you feel ashamed saying that to yourself?"

Tenchi had been lost in thought for a while now, keeping his head tucked down. *If I lower my head just a little more, I might be able to crawl under the table and come out on the other side. Yeah. That would be best...*

"Big sisters. Please stop fighting on New Year's Day. What are you going to do about my hard work in preparing this feast so we could all welcome the New Year peacefully together?"

At Sasami’s voice, the two who were still grabbing each other turned around.

"If you absolutely insist on doing this, I won't stop you. Go out into the garden and grapple or punch each other as much as you like. We can even have Tenchi-bro act as a witness."

"Sasami... it was just a joke. There is no way I would ever do something so unrefined."

Remembering she was in front of Tenchi, Ayeka regained her composure instantly. She reclaimed her "Royal Smile" and even smiled brightly as she straightened Ryoko’s collar for her.

"Creepy. Get off me... Seriously, this only happened because of you. Tenchi. Are you listening? Tenchi!"

"Y-yes!"

A reply came back from under the table. Ryoko peered down and her eyes met Tenchi’s perfectly.

"...Let me ask you something. What are you doing in a place like that?"

"I thought I'd... change my perspective a bit... just kidding..."

"....."

Breaking that hopeless silence, Katsuhito’s laughter rang out.

"Ho ho ho. It is good to see the young ones have so much energy. Tenchi. It would be nice if you had a bit more spirit yourself, but well, one gets used to anything in time."

Katsuhito stood up while laughing "ho ho ho" and beckoned Tenchi.

"Now then, shall we head to our first practice? I shall be over there, so come along before you eat too much. Farewell."

After giving a light nod to everyone, Katsuhito leisurely left the room.

"Now, now, young ladies, how about a game of Karuta over there?" It was Tenchi’s father who rescued the group from the dampened mood with his natural spirit of hospitality.

"If Father says so, I shall be happy to be your opponent," Ayeka said. She was flawless in such social situations.

"Ah, Sasami wants to play too~!"

"I'll play too~!" Mihoshi hurriedly looked up while still clutching a piece of mochi in her mouth. "Wait, I can't eat this very well. Is it a relative of a slime or something?"

Mihoshi was still in the middle of eating her ozoni soup.

"That's called mochi. It's made from rice."

"My, Sasami-chan, you know everything, don't you? Your big sister told me you taught her how to make today's feast, right? Perhaps I should have you teach me how to cook next time."

"Eh? U-uh, yeah..." Sasami stole a glance at her sister and spoke vaguely. Discussing the details of cooking here was a bad idea. "You see, Big Sister isn't used to teaching outsiders. Maybe later."

"???" A large question mark appeared on Mihoshi's face as she watched them go. "Um, did I say something wrong?"

Washu, who had been eating silently until then, picked up a black bean and crushed it between her fingers.

"Do you really think that princess can cook? Even with this, she said she made it herself, but it's obvious from this plump finish that it wasn't Ayeka. It's best not to talk about cooking."

"My, is that so? I didn't notice..."

"The only thing that princess could probably manage is soaking the beans in water overnight. Do you get it? Sasami-chan didn't learn from her sister; she taught her sister."

In fact, that was exactly the case.

"You're a detective, aren't you? You could afford to have a slightly sharper eye for observation."

"Ah, I'm sorry..."

"Well, there's no point in apologizing to me."

"Ah..."

"Well, shall we go?"

While lending a hand to Mihoshi, who almost tripped in her unfamiliar kimono, Washu scrutinized the face of this famous detective once again.

"Maybe you'll be the one to win it all."

"Eh?"

"I'm talking about Tenchi."

"Win it... no way." Mihoshi's cheeks flushed. "What should I do? Someone like me is slow and clumsy, and I have no redeeming qualities other than being lucky. I wonder if it's okay for me to be that happy while pushing aside Ryoko-san and Ayeka-san. Don't you think so too? Washu-sa... oh?"

Mihoshi peered at Washu with a confused look while helping the scientist back up after she had suffered a spectacular fall.

"Ouch, ouch... I ended up doing a gag-style pratfall." Washu straightened the hem of her formal kimono and looked back at Mihoshi resentfully.

"Listen, it's not like it's been decided. I just said that as long as those two are constantly fighting, you have a chance too. By the way, are you making any effort toward that?"

"Effort... I feel like if I try to make an effort, it'll just backfire..."

"Hmm... that's a sharp observation."

"But why do you care so much about me? You're Ryoko-san's creator, aren't you? Aren't you cheering for her?"

"I hate romance," Washu declared flatly, returning to her persona as a cool, genius scientist.

"Eh?"

"I don't care who it is, I just wish someone would hook up with Tenchi soon. Otherwise, I can't conduct my genetic research, can I?"

"??"

"I want to know what Tenchi's ability actually is. Is it a unique physical constitution or spiritual energy? To find that out, I really need to raise one from scratch."

"Raise one from scratch..."

"A child, a child. Ah, that's right. I don't have to wait. If I just get Tenchi to cooperate a little..."

"Eh, Washu-san, surely you don't mean..." Mihoshi, who was about to say "taking Tenchi-san by force," hurriedly covered her mouth and turned even redder.

"...Actually, I'll stop. No matter how much it's for research, that’s going a bit too far..."

"Exactly!!" Mihoshi emphasized instinctively. "No matter who Tenchi-san chooses, we have to play fair. I believe everyone should have an equal chance. I don't think anyone should use their status, threats, or lure him with genes. Let's go at it fair and square! Right, Washu-san?"

Hmm, she might actually have a point... Washu thought.

"You're quite serious, aren't you? I've gained a new respect for you. Alright! Washu will support you. Give it your best."

"Yes!"

"By the way, have you already thought of a concrete strategy?"

"....."

"Since you're talking so big, you must have something, right?"

"....."

"Don't tell me you haven't thought of anything?"

"...I'm sorry."

As it turned out, Mihoshi had indeed thought of nothing at all.

"Sigh... this has a long way to go. But I wonder who Tenchi actually likes."

That was the truth. Every problem started there and ended there. And as for the crucial person, Tenchi...

He had already disappeared long ago.

"How are you feeling right now?"

"How are you feeling right now?"

If someone were to ask Tenchi this question, he would likely answer like this:

"Well... I'm happy. (Bashfully, but firmly.) I mean, being surrounded by cute girls, and on top of that, having them even fight over me... I'm grateful for it. Last New Year's, I spent it with just Grandpa and Dad, just the three of us. We're a father-son household, you know? It's always been like that. A New Year with women around is something I couldn't have imagined. Just that alone makes me happy."

Suppose that "someone" was a shallow reporter. The next question would be this:

"I see. I understand perfectly. Well then, let me ask you straight out. Is it true that you are engaged to Princess Ayeka?"

Tenchi would panic.

"That's a lie! I'm not engaged. There were just... various misunderstandings..."

The reporter would likely ignore Tenchi's statement and continue:

"Ryoko-san was a childhood friend-slash-lover, wasn't she? What's the situation there? I've also heard rumors about you and Mihoshi-san from the Galaxy Police. You're also seeing the genius scientist Washu-san, aren't you? And while this isn't something to speak of at this point, there are stories that you are quite fond of Princess Ayeka's younger sister, Sasami-chan, even though she's still a child. Do you intend to groom her into a bride of your own preference in the future?"

Tenchi would be speechless.

"W-what a thing to say! I haven't—I haven't even laid a finger on anyone yet! Whether I like someone or not is a question far before marriage. Sure, I'm a guy. It's not like I feel bad when girls approach me. But it's true! Even when we went to the hot springs, I didn't lay a finger on anyone! Of course, I haven't even had a kiss yet! Even if you say we're 'seeing each other,' they're all staying at my house, so it can't be helped!"

The reporter would press him as if they had him cornered.

"And yet, nothing has happened? My, that’s hard to believe. Please speak honestly. Even if you deny it so much, everyone knows the fact that you were peeping at the hot springs."

"Like—I—said, Dad forced me to... I’m a pure first-year high school student! I love girls, but I've never even laid a finger on one! What are you trying to say?"

"You're quite obsessed with that 'laid a finger' part. Well then, let's say you have touched them. Anything after that is off the record..."

"....."

"It's okay. I won't put it in an article, so just a little bit of the truth..."

".....!"

"It's actually 'that' one, isn't it? It's Ryoko-san, after all, right? She’s very bold."

".....!!"

If Tenchi had been a dog, he would have bitten this reporter to pieces long ago. However, life was something that didn't end so simply.

Tenchi, having entered the grounds of the Masaki Shrine—which was quiet despite being New Year's—stopped and let out a deep sigh.

"What should I do? Ayeka-san is completely set on it, and Ryoko is pressing me in her own way..."

Tenchi thought to himself. Sure, Ayeka was attractive. Leaving aside the times she fought with Ryoko, women as graceful and refined as her were rare these days. Even her high-handed pride felt exactly like a princess should.

But Ryoko was cute, too. Her violent streaks were a lost cause, but her single-minded devotion was a good quality. Just because he had awakened her didn't mean he had to take responsibility, but it felt wrong not to respond when she loved him so much...

And then there was Mihoshi. He had been startled when she fell from the sky, but a girl with a career felt a little different. Well, there was room for debate on whether she was suited for the job of a detective, but she had technically

resolved the Kagato incident. Above all, her charm lay in her warm presence. She didn't say much to his face, but it felt good to be with her because he could let his guard down. Or rather, he felt at peace.

Tenchi further called to mind the remaining two.

Sasami was cute and reliable. No matter who she married in the future, she would undoubtedly become a better wife than anyone else.

The genius scientist, Washu. Whether she even held an interest in mundane things like romance or marriage was a mystery, but one look at those eyes was enough to know her talent was anything but ordinary. He didn't think he could ever compete with her, but he wondered what would happen if she actually fell in love. Even just having her look his way with a grin made his heart skip a beat.

Tenchi sighed again.

Oh, man. Why am I so indecisive? It would have been better if I had never met Ryoko. Then I could have stayed a normal high school student, and I wouldn't be agonizing over being surrounded by girls like this.

That's it!

Tenchi suddenly realized something.

One girl was enough. He didn't need three or four or five. Having more wasn't necessarily better. Yes. That was a universal truth.

At this point, Tenchi began to agonize yet again.

Wait? What was that saying again?

"Not quite long enough for a sash, yet too long for a headband."

No, that wasn't it.

"The burnt child dreads the fire."

Not that either.

Uh...

"Is it not '**Too much is as bad as too little**'?"

"Whoa!!"

Tenchi nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Grandpa! Since when were you there!?"

With a cool expression, Katsuhito tossed a wooden sword toward him.

"You were busy thinking about strange things, so you could not even read my presence. Come, let us get to it."

In a corner of the shrine grounds set aside as a practice area, Tenchi stood opposite him at a distance as usual. He wondered how his grandfather knew what he was thinking. *This must be a secret ultimate technique,* he thought.

"Such things were written all over your face. You were grinning like a fool; it would be obvious to anyone. And you call yourself a first-year high school student when you cannot even use a proverb correctly?"

Tenchi lost that round. He gave up and took the basic stance. It was the form of the Masaki-style Kou-Ou-Ken passed down through the Juraian Royal Family. A series of unique, flowing movements followed.

"Was I really grinning that much? I was actually worrying quite seriously."

When he returned to the basic stance, Tenchi muttered to himself. His youthful face was flushed. Katsuhito gave a sudden smile.

"Why let it trouble you? You have your own good qualities. The fact that you worry is proof that you are thinking seriously. It is likely that everyone likes you for that kind of gentleness. There is no need to fret."

Tenchi looked up at the unexpected words. *I see. Grandpa really did understand after all.*

A shy smile appeared on Tenchi's face.

"I still have a long way to go. I have to master the Kou-Ou-Ken like you soon, Grandpa. Otherwise, I will not be able to protect the people important to me when it counts."

Katsuhito nodded while still smiling. Master and prize pupil. Grandfather and grandson. It was a moving tableau. However, it was a characteristic of this story that such scenes never lasted long.

"Hello~. You're working hard, aren't you?"

"R-Ryoko!"

She was here already. Tenchi felt discouraged inwardly. *What happened to the Karuta tournament? I went through all that trouble to sneak away.*

"Oh, don't mind me. You can keep going. I'll just watch from here."

What incredibly considerate words. While returning to the basic stance, Tenchi stole a glance at Ryoko's face. Usually...

"What are you doing, practicing so half-heartedly? Your movements are so slow I can't stand to watch. Come here, I'll give you some real training. Come on! Here I go!"

"Hey! Don't just disappear. I'm human, remember! I can't fly or teleport like you do."

"That's why you'll always be hopeless. Look, I've got your back."

"Ow, ow, ow! Don't use your claws. Don't bite. Stop choking me! Are you a wildcat or something?"

"This will be useful when you have to fight a wildcat-type alien."

"As if that'll ever happen."

"It will! Back when I was a space pirate, on a planet called Acorn Mountain..."

"Huh?"

"A challenge arrived. It said if I won, I'd get the secret treasure, the 'Golden Acorn'..."

"The Golden Acorn? You mean that story where a letter comes from a wildcat, and when you go there, the acorns are fighting over who's the most important, and after you help judge them, the wildcat asks if you want a salmon head or

the golden acorns as a reward? Isn't that a fairy tale? 'The Acorns and the Wildcat'..."

"Thanks for the exposition, Tenchi. You sure know a lot."

"Don't 'you sure know a lot' me! Do you enjoy bullying me like that?"

"But Tenchi, you're just so cute."

That was the usual pattern. *Apologies to Kenji Miyazawa, the father of Japanese fantasy.*

While he was lost in these strange recollections, the practice resumed, and Tenchi no longer had time for idle thoughts.

Mm. This is bad.

Tenchi muttered in his heart as he found himself entirely on the defensive. *I tend to get stiff when someone is watching. But why is Ryoko so quiet today? She must be up to something.*

Tenchi stole another look at Ryoko. Sitting on the veranda in her kimono, she looked strangely demure.

Is she actually a little worried about the fight she had with Ayeka-san earlier? Even so...

No, this is no time to be thinking about that.

Tenchi tried to force his mind to concentrate on the practice.

I shouldn't be mooning over girls so early in the New Year.

What I need right now is to polish my own skills.

Grandpa told me to believe in my own power. Was that before the fight with Kagato? He believed in me when I didn't even know if I could use the Tenchi Sword. I wonder if I've become even a little better now compared to then.

Abruptly, the image of Kagato and the sight of Ryoko thrown aside like a ragdoll flashed across Tenchi's mind. And along with it, the sight of himself, unable to compete with Kagato's power.

After that, certainly, he had won.

But that wasn't his power. If not for the mysterious strength given to him by the spirit of the legendary ship Tsunami, he would have vanished from the universe without a trace of dust before that overwhelming force. He still didn't understand what it was that allowed him to defeat Kagato then.

The Light Hawk Wings. And the Light Hawk Sword. He had certainly been wielding what was called the greatest mystery and the greatest energy in the universe. No, he hadn't even been conscious of it.

It was as if Tsunami's will and heart had moved into him. That overflowing light and power. It was as if he had become a part of it.

Grandpa hadn't said a single word about that power.

Tenchi had asked him after they returned. But Grandpa had only shaken his head and said this:

"Tenchi. That is your power. It is your destiny. You should hone yourself. That is all I can tell you."

My destiny?

Suddenly, Ryoko's face flashed through Tenchi's mind.

"I am Tenchi's. Tenchi is mine. Tenchi is my very life!!"

The thought was so sudden that he nearly dropped his wooden sword. At that exact moment...

"Toryaa!!"

Katsuhito's strike stopped a mere millimeter from Tenchi's forehead.

Tenchi slumped to the ground on the spot.

Just then...

"Tea is ready~!"

Ryoko's voice called out.

"Oh, thank you. Shall we call it a day, then?"

Katsuhito turned around with his usual unruffled expression.

Ryoko made tea? Tenchi, still slumped on the ground, turned around with an expression as if the end of the world had arrived.

This is weird. Something is definitely up. Ayeka-san maybe, but I can't imagine Ryoko even coming up with the idea of making tea. What is wrong with today?

Ignoring Tenchi's suspicions, Ryoko and Katsuhito sat on the veranda and began a peaceful conversation.

"Oh my, tea made by a girl really does taste different. Ryoko, you have become quite feminine lately. That kimono suits you well, too."

Being praised by Katsuhito, Ryoko looked down slightly. It was as if she were bashful.

Bashful?

Tenchi wondered if the world had turned upside down.

He timidly spoke up.

"Ryoko. ...Um..."

"Here, tea."

Without a moment's delay, a teacup was handed to him. Her smile was dazzling. It was the kind of thing fast-food restaurants called "Smile = 0 yen."

Tenchi sipped the tea while standing, feeling as though he had been handed a bomb. The questions he had started to form in his head were echoing.

What's wrong? What on earth happened? What do you want to say to me? Why did you choose today of all days to make me tea?

As if seeing through Tenchi's heart, Ryoko asked:

"Is it good?"

"Oh, yeah..."

He nearly choked on the tea.

Is it good? She asked if it's good?

Ryoko was being attentive.

Tenchi was speechless. This wasn't Ryoko. At least, it wasn't the Ryoko who had been fighting with Ayeka-san earlier.

Tenchi nodded pointlessly while staring at her. *What's going to happen next? Please, just don't say "Am I pretty?" I'm naturally faint-hearted. If you ask me that, how am I supposed to answer?*

Then, as if seeing through that as well, Ryoko opened her mouth.

"Hey, Tenchiii..."

"Whoa!"

The teacup slipped from Tenchi's hand. To keep a cup from dropping in this state would require reflexes on par with Magic Johnson. Unfortunately, Tenchi's reflexes weren't quite that high-quality.

"What are you doing?"

Katsuhito caught the cup just before it hit the ground. With an exasperated look, he placed the cup back in Tenchi's hand, then stretched his back and rotated his shoulders a few times.

"Well now. Ryoko has something to talk to Tenchi about, I gather? As long as you are at it, why don't you two go check on the carrot field? I shall be heading back to the main house."

With only that, Katsuhito quickly started walking toward the main house—the Masaki home.

"W-wait!"

Don't leave me alone.

Tenchi instinctively tried to follow, but something held his arm back with unexpected strength.

Thin fingers, surprisingly delicate. He couldn't believe it was the same hand of the Ryoko who had been poking him around and grabbing him by the collar until now. Why did the impression change so much just by the hand emerging from a kimono sleeve?

Tenchi turned around and raised his gaze to her face.

Her lips were half-parted; her eyes looked as if they were pleading for something, appearing slightly moist. Her cheeks were flushed.

This is bad! This is really not good!

A shiver ran down Tenchi's spine. It was a different kind of shiver than the one he felt when facing Kagato.

"Ryoko...?"

As if drawn in by his voice, Ryoko reached out and caught his other arm.

"Tenchi..."

B-bad. I've backed myself into a corner. If you spoke to someone in that tone in this situation, it was obvious what kind of response you'd get. *What a fool I am.*

Ryoko took a step forward. Their faces were so close he could feel her hot breath. If they got any closer, there was only one possible conclusion.

The widescreen in Tenchi's mind was already showing the next shot. Starring: Tenchi. A shocking kiss scene.

"W-wait! Just a second!"

Tenchi gathered every last shred of his remaining reason and pulled away from Ryoko.

"Ryoko. I didn't mean it like that. Let me prepare myself mentally. If we do this so suddenly, my position is... Ryoko?"

Her wide-open eyes began to well up. Her lips were trembling.

"R-Ryoko??"

Tenchi wished from the bottom of his heart that he could return to his bed. If anything could save him from this situation, it was only the absolute darkness created by a warm futon.

Just then...

"YOU IDIOOOOOOT!!"

A shock pattern flared, and an impact like a thunderclap rang through his skull.

"Do you have any idea how I felt coming here?! I thought if I acted like Ayeka, you might look my way, so I thought about it with everything I had! Fine, forget it! You hate me. You'd kiss Ayeka, but you won't kiss me! I hate you, I hate you...!"

"W-wait! I didn't kiss..."

I didn't! It's not a lie! Tenchi intended to say it, but his words were drowned out by Ryoko's storm-like scream.

"Someone like you... it would have been better if you had just died back then!!"

All was lost.

Before the retreating figure of Ryoko, whose shoulders trembled with rage, Tenchi stood helpless, unable to do anything but watch.

I'm sorry, Ryoko. But it's not a lie. It's pathetic, but I've never kissed anyone. I mean, right? A kiss isn't something you can do so easily. Something like that is more special...

Special?

Unexpectedly, his chest ached.

Was he saying this feeling wasn't special?

This feeling—this girl wanting to kiss him so badly that she had abandoned all pride?

"Ryoko..."

Suddenly, Ryoko turned around.

Tears were streaming down her cheeks in several tracks. She looked just like a child who had been scolded by her mother.

"Ryoko, I’m sorry."

Her tearful face shifted into an expression of surprise.

"I just, um, didn't know what to say."

Her surprise turned into a look of suspicion.

"I can't say it well, but I like the usual Ryoko better. How do I put it... when you act like that, I don't know what to do either..."

The suspicious look suddenly softened.

"Tenchi. I..."

Ryoko hesitated. She appeared to be searching desperately for words.

"I... I don't want anyone to take you away. Is it wrong to say I love you like this? I don't know how I’m supposed to say it. I wasn't raised by parents like Ayeka or Mihoshi were."

Ryoko’s face clouded with a lonely shadow.

That was right. Ryoko had been created by Washu. She had possessed this form since the moment of her birth, trained for the sole purpose of being used by Kagato. She was an expert in combat and destruction.

"Saying 'I love you'... it’s the first feeling I ever learned all by myself. For seven hundred years, I thought of nothing but crawling out of that shrine. When I finally managed to get just my spirit form outside, you were there. You were so small, just bouncing around everywhere, but you always went back to your 'Mommy'... I was jealous."

Tenchi looked at Ryoko’s face, unable to say a word. This was the first time Ryoko had ever spoken like this.

"And you, that little version of you, used to say it. 'Mommy, I love you! Mommy, I love you the most!'"

Ryoko raised her head and looked Tenchi straight in the eye. Her gaze was intense, as if trying to devour him.

"Ryoko..."

I see. So that was it.

It wasn't just romance. To Ryoko, he was the first person she had ever met who was like a 'Mommy' figure.

"You..."

His words caught in his throat. A memory he had kept sealed in the depths of his heart returned vividly.

His mother, whom the wisteria-colored kimono had suited so well.

His mother, smiling gently under a white sunshade.

An eternal summer, locked within the picture frame of a memory.

The mother he had only been able to spend five years with...

No, I shouldn't remember. I finally, finally managed to forget until now.

Before he realized it, Tenchi had turned his face away, clenching his fists so hard his nails dug into his palms. His vision was blurring. He hurriedly wiped away the tears with the sleeve of his work clothes.

"Damn it... I remembered."

Suddenly, he felt a warm sensation on his back. Arms wrapped around him, and the long sleeves of a kimono enveloped Tenchi’s body like wings.

"I saw you. ...I saw you the whole time."

Ryoko pressed her cheek against Tenchi’s back, as if to soothe his suddenly stiffened body.

"I couldn't do anything, but I was watching you the entire time. You used to come to the shrine to cry a lot, didn't you? ...I can't tell you how much I wanted to call out to you. How much I wanted to stroke your head with these hands. ...But I couldn't. Then you started practicing with Grandpa, and you stopped coming to the shrine. I couldn't enter the main shrine area. But whenever you were outside... when you were playing, or when you fell and cried, I was always right there beside you. But... gradually, you stopped sensing my presence. It was as if you were trying to forget everything about your childhood. And then, one day, you left."

Ryoko fell silent for a moment, as if confirming the sensation of Tenchi's presence. Then, she began to speak again, her voice halting.

"I was lonely. ...I realized for the first time then just how painful being lonely is. I hated you so much for making me feel that way. I wanted to catch you and tear you into a thousand pieces. But my physical body was submerged in that dark, cold shrine, unable to move a single finger..."

The warmth suddenly pulled away, and Tenchi sensed Ryoko backing away.

"...I guess I am a monster after all. It's just like Ayeka says. I can't become like a human. It would have been better if Ryo-Ohki and I had just kept flying through space forever and ever. Until one day, my regenerative organs gave out and I just collapsed, remaining there until I lost consciousness..."

Tenchi turned around, unable to bear it any longer.

"That's not true! Don't say things like that, Ryoko!!"

Before he knew what he was doing, Tenchi's hands reached out and pulled Ryoko close.

"None of that matters! Ryoko is Ryoko. You're fine just as you are. You don't have to try to force yourself to be human. Because I like Ryoko exactly the way she is!"

Ryoko's movements came to a sudden halt.

Like?

He liked Ryoko?

Did he really just say that?

"Tenchi..."

Ryoko’s cheeks flared with heat.

It’s strange. Why am I trembling so much?

Why does my body feel so hot?

"Tenchi. ...I feel strange. I have no strength."

Weakly, Ryoko tried to shake off Tenchi’s hands. Then, she lost her balance and fell against his chest.

"Ryoko?"

Still held by Tenchi, Ryoko struggled for a brief moment.

No.

I’m... scared.

Turning her face away and digging in her nails like a kitten, Ryoko desperately tried to control this emotion—one she didn't know how to name.

"What’s wrong, Ryoko?"

There was no answer. He could only feel her rapid breathing.

"Ryoko!"

When he forced her to face him, her expression flickered with something between a plea and terror.

"Tenchi... No... I can't... It hurts so much... I..."

Suddenly, before she could resist, Tenchi pulled her in and gathered her into a tight embrace. For a moment, her breath stopped. It felt as if something hard inside Ryoko had snapped. Eventually, that feeling vanished into a melting warmth.

Ryoko closed her eyes.

A warm darkness.

To think such a feeling existed.

Is this what it means to like someone?

I don't want to let go.

I want to stay like this forever.

This...

This is love, isn't it?

In the gentle early-spring sunlight, the two of them looked as if they had captured a moment of eternity. Such a moment comes to everyone—a moment where, in each other's arms, one can believe that only this time and this warmth are eternal. Even if that eternity is one that fades away like the light snow of spring.

However.

The goddess of eternity, who had descended upon the two for a fleeting moment, had already flown away to the next second. And the reality that follows such moments often turns out to be terribly cruel.

Reality possessed a clear malice. And that malice was, at that very moment, just about to pass through the torii gate.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING...!?"

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING...!?"

Sensing instinctive danger at that voice, the two quickly pulled apart. There was no need to even turn around. This was the worst possible reality. Ayeka, dragging thunderclouds and a premonition of doom behind her, strode up to the two of them. She stood blocking the center of the path, refusing to yield an inch.

"A-Ayeka-san," Tenchi replied, his voice pitching higher. "What... what's the matter?"

What about the Karuta tournament? Tenchi stopped himself just in time from adding that. For Tenchi, it was a good effort, but if one were to be picky, he should have searched for more appropriate words.

"What is the matter with what?" came the icy reply.

"I mean, what...?" Tenchi felt like he was digging his own grave. It surely would have been much easier if he had just been buried right then and there.

"I am asking you what you were doing with Ryoko-san just now!!"

A gaze like a bounty hunter's locked onto Tenchi's face. In Tenchi's mind, an image of a candle about to be blown out by a sinister wind appeared vividly.

One must not laugh. A boy's heart is simply not built to withstand this kind of tension.

"TENCHI-SAMA!!"

Ayeka's voice blew Tenchi over, candle and all.

"Y-yes!"

Ayeka's gaze remained fixed squarely on Tenchi's face. Inside his almost empty head, Tenchi struggled desperately to assemble a sentence.

"Um, I... it’s not like I was doing anything in particular..."

He could almost see his words being shot down by Ayeka’s glare.

"Ryoko started feeling a little sick, so, um..."

Ayeka’s eyes narrowed into slits.

"I was worried..."

The final words escaped his empty head. Ayeka heavily shifted her gaze toward Ryoko.

"You say this woman... started feeling sick?"

Once again, a basilisk-like gaze returned to Tenchi.

"I would have preferred you tell me a more convincing lie."

Ayeka attempted to interrogate Tenchi with absolute composure. However, she couldn't do it. Her anger at being betrayed was simply too great. Ayeka’s lips trembled.

"I... I... even though I trusted you, Tenchi-sama. To think you would cheat on me before we are even married!"

Ayeka glared fiercely at Ryoko and tried to grab her with a force unbecoming of a princess, but her hands grasped only empty air.

"What the hell are you doing?"

A voice came from behind Ayeka. It was a voice that sounded utterly fed up. Ayeka flared up and tried once more to catch her hateful enemy, and once again grasped empty air.

"Is it wrong for me and Tenchi to be together? Huh? Why do you only come up with such vulgar thoughts?"

Again, the voice came from behind her. Ayeka’s face twitched. She could no longer forgive this.

"You are the vulgar one! I am the First Princess of the Juraian Royal Family! How dare you call me vulgar! Why don't you stop appearing and disappearing and just stand still!?"

Ignoring Ayeka’s words, Ryoko stepped closer. The distance was about ten centimeters.

"And what then? Huh, Princess Ayeka? Do you think I’m just going to stand here and let you hit me?"

"W-what!?"

Suddenly, Ryoko vanished. But before Ayeka could even think, Ryoko’s discarded kimono fell over her with a thud.

"Ryoko?"

Tenchi looked up at the sky in astonishment.

"Wait, what is this!?"

By the time Ayeka had ripped the kimono off her head, Ryoko—now clad in a bodysuit-like battle suit—was hovering above Ayeka, holding an Aura Blade at the ready. Ryoko’s eyes glowed with a golden light. It was a dangerous sign.

"I’m sick and tired of you showing up every time something happens. 'Tenchi, Tenchi'—when did Tenchi ever get engaged to you? You're the only one making a fuss about it. The universe doesn't revolve around you, you know. Let me tell you something: I am not your servant or anything else. Say one more thing, and I’ll cut you down with this!"

Ryoko thrust the tip of the Aura Blade right under Ayeka’s nose.

"W-what!?"

Ayeka tried to push the blade away, but suddenly stopped her hand. This was different. This wasn't the Ryoko she usually fought with.

The moment Ayeka faltered, the Aura Blade flashed. The sash of her formal kimono was sliced clean in two, and the front fell open. For a second, Ayeka couldn't grasp what had happened to her. Tenchi was the same. Understanding only dawned after both sleeves of her kimono were sliced off as well.

"S-stop it... Ryoko! Stop it!"

Tenchi reflexively jumped between the two of them.

"GET OUT OF THE WAY, TENCHI!!"

Ryoko’s blade swung horizontally, and the shockwave sliced through Tenchi’s work clothes.

"YOU!! Do you intend to kill Tenchi-sama too!?"

Ayeka’s scream, bordering on a shriek, echoed through the air.

"Shut up! You're always, always, always getting in my way! What’s so wrong with me loving Tenchi!? If I have to hand him over to you, I’d rather kill Tenchi right here! And then I’ll die too!!"

"Eek! Ryoko!"

Ryoko’s blade flashed past, missing Tenchi’s carotid artery by a hair’s breadth.

Was this the same Ryoko from just a few moments ago?

What was that fleeting glimpse he had just seen, that scene straight out of a youth romance film?

No.

This was no time to be thinking about that.

In the time it took him to ponder such things, his sixteen-year-old life might very well come to a close.

But...

"What did I ever do to deserve this!?"

In a desperate frenzy, Tenchi lunged forward and clung to the legs of the hovering Ryoko.

"Stop it! Just stop, I don't care how! I only just made it back alive, you know! Both of you were holding hands and being so happy back then. So why does it always have to turn out like this!?"

"Dammit! Let go, Tenchi! I'm going to slice this woman to ribbons!"

Having been dragged down to the ground by Tenchi, Ryoko launched a fierce counterattack. She punched, she bit, and she scratched.

"Ow, ow, ow! I am not your scratching post! I'm begging you, please just calm down!"

"You! What do you think you are doing to my Tenchi-sama!?"

Ayeka threw herself into the fray. By now, Aura Blades and force fields were long forgotten. It no longer looked like a struggle between sentient beings; it was a three-way catfight. Had a rational observer witnessed the scene, they surely would have gone to fetch a bucket of water.

"Um, Washu-san? Why are you carrying a bucket?"

"It’s fine, it’s fine. You’ll understand soon enough."

Mihoshi started to say that it was quite heavy, but Washu cut her off before she could speak. She fell silent and began climbing the stone steps. Ryo-Ohki followed closely behind, trotting along at their heels.

Suddenly, Ryo-Ohki’s ears perked up. The sound reached Mihoshi’s ears as well—shrill female shrieks, shouting, and the voice of a man pleading desperately in between. Even as slow as Mihoshi could be, she understood this much: it was a lovers' spat.

"Oh my, how terrible!"

Driven by her instincts as a detective, Mihoshi broke into a run while clutching the heavy bucket. That she didn't spill a single drop of water was a testament to her professional training; she must have undergone fire drills during her time stationed in the frontier. Regardless...

Splash!

A precise and swift firefighting operation, executed without a millimeter of error, proved successful. Three soaking-wet heads turned simultaneously toward the source.

"Mihoshi-san...!"

"So, is this what you call a lovers' quarrel that spans the galaxy?"

"Washu-san!!"

While Tenchi gave his dim-witted response, Ayeka and Ryoko scrambled apart. They immediately began tidying themselves up, trying to look as presentable as possible after the unseemly display.

"I thought we should have an important talk, but for the three of you, changing clothes comes first," was Washu's advice as a scientist.

That said, fresh clothes didn't simply appear out of thin air. Washu looked at the three of them—who resembled disaster victims or, more accurately, rowdy schoolboys being scolded by their homeroom teacher—and let out a sigh.

"Oh, very well. At any rate, get changed properly, wash your faces, and come to my room. When you didn't come back, I figured as much... You lot are a princess and a prince, aren't you? Don't you have anything better to do?"

"But Ryoko started..."

Ayeka instinctively tried to talk back, but she lost her words and flushed crimson before Washu's cool gaze. *Well, that's true, but... why must I, a Princess, be scolded like a child?* Forgetting her own childish behavior, Ayeka glared at Ryoko. *If you want my opinion, this is all the fault of this home-wrecking cat. If she weren't here, there wouldn't be a single person in this universe to stand between Tenchi-sama and me.*

Her gaze sharpened involuntarily. Ignoring her, Ryoko stood up. She made a show of dusting herself off and stretched like a cat.

"Geez. Just when we were trying to have a little private time together. I'm beat, so I'm going home to sleep."

Those words rubbed Ayeka's nerves the wrong way yet again.

"Wait just a minute, Ryoko-san!!"

Ayeka snapped to her feet. Tenchi hurriedly stood up as well.

"Again? If you're going to keep doing nothing but that, I absolutely won't show it to you. Sigh... I was a fool to treat you lot like adults. Goodbye."

Washu turned on her heel and began walking away. Mihoshi hurriedly followed after her.

"What's the matter, Washu-san?"

"It’s fine, it’s fine. Just leave those brats alone and let them duel as much as they want. Honestly, it makes me sick to think I’ve been working so hard for a bunch of low-brows who don't even take an interest in what the greatest genius scientist in the universe is doing."

"Huh?"

"They're blinded by lust. If all they have on their minds is that boy, they should just get on with it and take action. Ryo-Ohki! Don't hide there, come to Washu!"

"Meow??"

Having hidden behind some bushes to avoid danger, Ryo-Ohki turned around with a carrot in its mouth and ears standing tall.

"Another carrot! In that form, you really are nothing but a beast. Then again, I'm the one who made it so you could replenish energy anywhere. Ugh, it makes me so mad!"

"W-what is it, Washu-san?"

Mihoshi had absolutely no idea why Washu had suddenly flown into a rage. In all likelihood, not a single person present understood. That was only natural; if she didn't say it, there was no way they could know. However, such a circuit did not exist in Washu’s brain. To her, if she said she had an important talk, anyone who didn't understand that was simply stupid. It was that kind of world.

Suddenly, Washu turned back.

"I’m bored! I’m so bored I feel like I'm going to die!! No one ever comes to ask this Washu for anything. On top of that, everyone has settled into this primitive lifestyle on a planet that's like a deserted island. All I ever hear is 'Tenchi-sama, Tenchi-sama.' And even then, they just talk and no one takes

action. And here I was, actually thinking about turning this frontier planet into the greatest scientific metropolis in the galaxy!!"

"Whaaat!?"

So she had such a grand scheme. Tenchi had wondered what she was doing cooped up in her room all day outside of mealtimes. The thoughts of a genius were truly incomprehensible.

Come to think of it, there had been one other person quite like her—though he was already deceased. Remembering Kagato, Mihoshi muttered to herself.

"It’s true what they say about birds of a feather."

"Hm?" Washu caught the remark.

"No, nothing! But Washu-san, that’s not a good idea."

"Why not?"

When asked back so innocently, it was hard to find an answer.

"Because, well, Earth is technically a Galactic Special Protected Area, and any interference or contact from higher civilizations is strictly forbidden. Of course, combat and infrastructure construction are prohibited too!"

Mihoshi shook her fist as she emphasized her point.

"That's why... honestly, you aren't listening to a word I say, are you?"

Mihoshi started to say that she was listening, but she swallowed the words instantly. One never knew what kind of curse might befall them if they angered a genius.

"Listen, alright? That’s why, as a first step, I built an Ansible. Ryuko’s ship is in pieces, your ship was swallowed by a black hole, and Ryo-Ohki is a wanted pirate vessel. At this rate, there's no way to make my talent known to the universe, right? Ah, I really am a genius. Hey, First Class Detective Mihoshi!"

"Y-yes!"

Responding instinctively was the tragedy of a civil servant.

"I am appointing you as my research assistant. Come along quickly. Run!"

Washu began racing down the stone steps with glee.

"W-wait..."

An Ansible? She built that instantaneous pan-universal communication device that served as a symbol of high-level civilization?

Hooray! Now I can send my report on the resolution of the Kagato case! After that, it's vacation time! A vacation! I'll finally be able to take a proper break and just relax. Maybe I'll go to the Kamidake Onsen where I first met Tenchi-sama. It doesn't have to be just the two of us. I'll just have to make my own chance.

Carried away by her own fantasies, Mihoshi completely forgot what kind of ripples that report would end up causing.

"Ayeka-saaan! Ryoko-saaan!"

While running back up the stone steps she had just descended, Mihoshi shouted in a bright voice. She then collided with the three who were coming down, still confused.

"It's big news! Huge news!!"

Mihoshi’s smile, as bright as a clear May day, was a bit too dazzling for the exhausted trio.

"What is it this time!?"

Tenchi asked back in a voice that sounded as though he were already tired of life itself. *I wonder if I can endure this every day? I wish Ayeka, Ryoko, Mihoshi, and Washu would all just go away somewhere along with their 'big news' for a little while.*

For a fleeting second, Tenchi truly wished for it. It was only natural. At the time, Tenchi had no way of knowing that his wish would soon come back to haunt him several times over. The same was true for Mihoshi, who was joyfully running down the steps, and for the rest of the Masaki family waiting at the house.

"This, you see, is called an Ansible."

In the center of the cluttered room, Washu pointed proudly at the device. The Ansible was the common property of the entire universe. Without this pan-universal instantaneous communication system, an Intergalactic Union would be impossible. Naturally, the same applied to the Galaxy Police, the Economic Union, trade guilds, the mass media, and every other pan-universal network.

The only person to have predicted this system and network on Earth at the end of the 20th century was a female science fiction writer named Ursula K. Le Guin, who lived in Portland, Oregon. But even she likely never imagined that the communication system she wrote about—or the transmissions sent through it—would actually be crisscrossing the universe on a daily basis.

Reality is indeed stranger than fiction.

Of course, it goes without saying that such things were far beyond Tenchi's imagination.

"This is it?"

Tenchi approached and looked closely at the device. It was a combination of an ordinary-looking monitor and keyboard—except for the mountain of discarded appliances and wiring behind it, and the mysterious gel-like substance in capsules. Tenchi decided not to ask what was behind it or how it worked. It was a wise decision.

Instead of asking those things, Tenchi said, "So, this means you can communicate with Jurai, right?"

Washu gave a grin. "You're pretty quick on the uptake, aren't you, boy?"

Suddenly, he heard the sound of someone catching their breath behind him.

"Wait. Please, do not contact them yet."

Ayeka was visibly shaken. It wasn't as if she hadn't considered it. On the contrary, she had thought about it constantly—from the moment she learned the Ryu-Oh was submerged at the bottom of the pond and its communication equipment was unusable, and from the moment the Ryu-Oh was destroyed by Kagato and she realized she had to find a replacement ship.

She had to tell her father, the Emperor of Jurai, about her brother Yosho. And if her brother had no intention of returning, she would have to take Sasami and return to Jurai herself. Barring exceptional circumstances, she likely wouldn't be able to return to Earth again.

I won't be able to see Tenchi-sama anymore...

Ayeka's heart rate quickened.

"Why not?" Tenchi turned around, looking puzzled. "Grandpa—I mean, Brother Yosho—has been found, and I'm sure your father and mother are worried about you."

Tenchi's words carried no hidden meaning.

That was one of his best qualities, but to the current Ayeka, it appeared as nothing more than sheer insensitivity. She felt like letting out a piercing shriek.

So, you wouldn't care if I were gone. To you, I suppose I was only that sort of woman after all. Unpleasant thoughts forced their way into her mind, one after another.

Lord Tenchi actually prefers Ryoko. I was just an interloper. As if on cue, the scene from earlier played across the screen of Ayeka's mind: Tenchi and Ryoko, locked in an embrace that looked like nothing other than a pair of lovers. In the next instant, Ayeka was screaming something she had never intended to say.

"I refuse!! Unless Lord Tenchi becomes engaged to me, I shall not return to Jurai!"

"Wh-whaaat?!"

Tenchi reflexively staggered backward.

Wh-what should I do? How am I supposed to settle this? Ry-Ryoko... I don't even care if you don't help me, just please don't start a bloodbath here.

However, the glimpse of Ryoko's face in his peripheral vision revealed a cold, mocking smirk.

"Heh, is that so? But little lost girl Ayeka has to go back to her house, doesn't she? It's a pity, but I guess it can't be helped."

Ryoko laughed with a triumphant "Heh-heh-heh" and politely offered to even give her a lift on Ryo-Ohki if she liked.

Even the usually resilient Ayeka was struck speechless.

If she managed to secure an engagement, such a thing would be utterly useless in the face of this woman. If Ayeka were gone, Ryoko would undoubtedly squeeze every drop of her wicked wit to beguile Lord Tenchi. Then, Lord Tenchi would surely fall completely under her thumb.

Oh, what am I to do!

For the first time in her life, Ayeka had collided with one of life's true dilemmas—a problem that could not be solved by money or power. Stuck in a stalemate, she gazed at Tenchi with pleading eyes.

Tell me not to go. Tell me you want me by your side.

But Tenchi only gazed back at her with a troubled expression.

"Well now, what's it going to be? I'm not so bored that I can just wait around forever, you know," Washu pressed. It was hard to believe she was the same person who, moments ago, had claimed to be dying of boredom.

Just as Ayeka began to contemplate the desperate measure of kidnapping Lord Tenchi, hijacking Ryo-Ohki, and fleeing into a journey across the unknown reaches of space...

Mihoshi, who had been listening in silence until now, spoke up.

“Um, if it's alright with you, I'd like to send my report first. And, Ayeka? If you really don't want me to, I can leave out the part about you and Sasami. That way, you can contact them yourself whenever you like. Would that be okay?”

It was an incredibly generous offer to make at a moment when the man she liked was being pressured into an engagement by another woman. Her broad-mindedness was rare indeed.

Of course, she hadn't said it consciously. She simply possessed a kind nature that made her want to help whenever she saw someone in trouble—even if that person was a romantic rival or a professional assassin.

At this unexpected lifeline, Ayeka’s face brightened instantly.

“Oh, thank you, Mihoshi!” Ayeka took Mihoshi's hands, overcome with emotion. “I don't know how to thank you...”

Mihoshi nodded with a smile, sat down before the terminal, and began typing in the Galaxy Police code numbers.

However, the situation had already shifted far beyond anything Mihoshi could have imagined. Through the Ansible, a tense state of affairs capable of turning this peaceful mountain village upside down suddenly began shouting at the carefree First-Class Detective.

“Mihoshi? Is that really you, Mihoshi?! Wait right there. Don't you dare cut the connection this time! I'm putting you through to Commissioner Anderson!”

The face of Mihoshi's superior—Chief Nobeyama of the Investigation Division, Sol System Branch, Galaxy Police 7th District HQ—appeared in a massive close-up on the monitor. His voice was completely frantic.

“Chief Nobeyama? My, it’s been quite a while...”

Behind the Chief, the familiar clamor of the station could be heard. What made it different from usual was the addition of crashing sounds like dropped coffee cups, the thundering of running feet, and the sound of officers colliding with one another.

Suddenly, a voice shouting “Did you say Mihoshi?!” drew closer, and the monitor was abruptly taken over by the face of a woman with her willow-thin eyebrows arched in fury.

“If you're alive, why haven't you contacted us?! Thanks to you, things are a mess over here! When Kagato’s ship, the Soja, appeared, the Mobile Units and Space Patrols scattered across the galaxy were called in. When they rushed to the scene, there were fragments of Juraian Royal ships everywhere, the wreckage of the Soja was drifting about, and on top of that, word got out that the notorious criminal battleship Ryo-Ohki was fleeing toward the third planet of the solar system! You know that even for the Galaxy Police, landing there is forbidden! But given the circumstances, our Commissioner and the Superintendent-General negotiated with your grandfather and moved the Union Council. They finally decided to dispatch a planetary search party as a special exception! What on earth have you been doing all this time?!”

Looking at the woman who was huffing and puffing with exertion, even the usually unflappable Mihoshi flinched slightly.

“O-oh... Kiyone, it's been a long time...”

The face of the woman called Kiyone twitched.

“What do you mean 'a long time'?! There are other things you should be saying! Do you have any idea how much I worried about you?!”

Her intensity surpassed even Ryoko's. Furthermore, she was breathtakingly beautiful. Her flowing, dark purple hair was neatly braided into two sections and gathered at the back. Her violet eyes, like amethysts, flashed with a sharp light, casting a dangerous aura over her entire being.

This woman was Mihoshi’s partner—the legendary "Purple Lightning" of the Galaxy Police, First-Class Detective Kiyone Makibi.

“Kiyone. I told you so many times to stop wearing that yellowish-green scarf. Especially with orange polka dots. I told you that you have to match it to your eye color! Because you combine colors like that, your complexion looks strange.”

Despite flinching, Mihoshi couldn't help herself. *If only she didn't have this fashion sense. She'd be a perfect beauty. But then again, she's never listened to a word I've said.*

“Mihoshi!!” Kiyone’s lips trembled with rage. “Do you have any idea what the situation is right now?! Report your current location, the persons you've contacted, and the progress and current status of the incident immediately! If you say one more word about fashion sense, I’ll shoot you!”

A bust-shot of Kiyone appeared on the monitor, aiming her blaster dead-center.

“Oh, stop it...” *I’ll talk. If only Kiyone would stay quiet for a second. She never lets me speak. Besides, I didn't actually say anything about her fashion sense out loud. I only thought it.*

“Excuse me a moment.”

A deep baritone voice echoed from off-screen.

“Thank you for saying everything I wanted to say. Kiyone, if you don't mind, I'd like to take over.”

“C-Commissioner Anderson...”

From behind the turning Kiyone, a leonine humanoid alien appeared.

“Excuse me. My deepest apologies for drawing a weapon within the station.”

Instantly reverting to the face of a professional detective, Kiyone gave a crisp salute and yielded her seat.

This was the true Kiyone. Hailing from Jurai, possessing a brilliant mind with an IQ over 200, a combat expert, and a super-elite whose future had been heralded since the Galaxy Police Academy began—it was a shame that luck never followed her. Had she never been paired with Mihoshi, she would surely be a star at Headquarters by now.

“It is as you've heard. Our headquarters is in a delicate situation. To put it bluntly, we are facing a crisis of survival. However, Mihoshi, seeing your healthy face has, for the time being, removed one of the factors. But the second and third factors remain. What happened to the Class-A wanted criminal, Kagato?”

The Commissioner’s face was grave. He looked somewhat haggard. Mihoshi felt a pang of guilt.

“I’m truly sorry for all the worry. Kagato has been destroyed.”

On the other side of the monitor, the Commissioner recoiled. “What? You did it alone?”

“No. Tenchi did it...”

“Tenchi? Who is that?”

“The person who saved me. He’s my first love. Tee-hee!” Mihoshi blushed and laughed bashfully.

Across the monitor, the sound of the Commissioner falling over was heard, and for a while, the screen showed only an empty chair.

“Th-that’s not what I meant,” the Commissioner continued as he climbed back into his seat. “I am asking which planet he is from and what sort of person he is.”

“Oh, is that all? Well, it would be faster if you talked to him yourself. Just a moment.”

Mihoshi vanished from the Commissioner's sight, followed by the sound of an argument.

“M-me? On screen? You've got to be joking. I've never even spoken to a foreigner before.”

“He's not a foreigner. He's a Leonian.”

“It’s the same thing!”

“You have to. You're a witness. A living witness to the resolution of the Kagato incident. It's okay, just speak normally. This thing seems to have an automatic translator.”

“Th-that's not the point!”

“Are you not a Terrestrial?” At that voice, Tenchi reflexively looked at Commissioner Anderson on the monitor. “You look like little more than a boy,

yet you say you defeated that Kagato? At any rate, please take a seat. How did you defeat that wanted criminal?”

Tenchi sat before the Ansible, looked at the face of the Leonian on the monitor, and then looked up at Mihoshi.

“I...”

“Well?”

“Kagato appeared here... well, at my house... and kidnapped Ryoko. So I... went to get her back. Ayeka and Mihoshi helped me, and we went to his ship on Ryo-Ohki...”

“Wait. When you say Ayeka, do you mean Princess Ayeka, the First Princess of the Juraian Royal Family?”

“Yes.”

“Is Princess Ayeka safe? And her sister, Princess Sasami? Are they there?”

Oh no. I let it slip about Ayeka. But it was too late now.

“Everyone is safe. They're doing well. Um, can I let Mihoshi talk now?”

“Everyone? Who is 'everyone'?”

“Ayeka, Sasami. Mihoshi. Ryoko. Ryo-Ohki. My Grandpa and Dad...”

Helping to spread the awkwardness of having let the cat out of the bag, Tenchi rattled off the names almost desperately.

“Wait! Line everyone up in front of the monitor. Right now!”

“No. That won't be necessary.”

Just as another unfamiliar female voice rang out from off-screen, the screen flickered and split, displaying each of their faces one by one.

“I’ve connected some small Terrestrial video cameras. They’re primitive mechanics, but they’ll have to do. By the way, Mr. Commissioner... if I hadn't

been here, you wouldn't just be missing a report; you wouldn't even know if your subordinate was alive. I'd appreciate a little gratitude."

There's more? Just how many locals did Mihoshi contact? The Commissioner frowned. Seeing how she handled the Ansible, he doubted she was an earthling.

"Who are you? Identify yourself!"

A soft, knowing chuckle rippled through the speakers. The screen shifted again to show a petite young girl.

"It's me. The girl genius scientist, Washu! I'm the one who built the Ansible. Ryoko, the Soja, Ryo-Ohki—Washu made them all!"

"Washu?!"

The Commissioner was struck dumb. Washu? The legendary genius student who was said to have been kidnapped centuries ago?

"By the way, this Ansible call is collect. I'm penniless at the moment. My hard currency went up in cosmic dust with the Soja, and I didn't have a bank account open. So, I don't need a certificate of appreciation; let's talk about a reward. We're stuck here without a ship, so I'd like you to make the trip out here. I'm sending the coordinates now. So, that's that."

Washu reached to cut the connection.

"W-wait, wait! Hold on a moment!"

The Commissioner's frantic voice stopped Washu's finger just in time.

"Did I not mention this is a Special Protected Area? It's not an uninhabited zone, is it? We can't just land where locals are swarming. We have to think of a way..."

Washu cut him off. "What, is that it? Don't you have a teleportation device over there?"

The Commissioner grimaced. "That's at Headquarters. Besides, that doesn't solve the problem."

"Um..." Tenchi poked his head into the frame. "It might be none of my business, but both the Ryu-Oh and Ryo-Ohki appeared in the sky over Okayama.

When they fell, they even trashed the Seto Ohashi Bridge. It was written off as a meteorite, so it didn't cause a bigger stir than that. So, it would be bad if a giant spaceship landed, but as long as you can handle things after you arrive, I think that 'teleportation device' thing would be fine. But only at my house, okay? I don't want you showing up in someone else's yard."

The Commissioner seemed slightly relieved.

"I see. A meteorite. So it's being treated as a strange phenomenon. The Special Protection Treaty is working as intended. In protected zones, all spacecraft navigation is prohibited. If navigation becomes unavoidable, an electromagnetic shield is automatically deployed. In other words, they become undetectable by radar or anything else. Essentially, they can only be seen visually. And even if they are seen, anything that can't be detected is treated as an Unidentified Flying Object. What was the word in your language?"

"UFO?"

"Yes. UFO. But young man..."

"Yes?"

"Knowing that much is a grave matter. If there were others like you, the protection treaty itself would become meaningless. Don't tell me..."

"No, it's just me, my Dad, and my Grandpa. To be precise, I'm not entirely human myself. My Grandpa is actually Princess Ayeka's older brother..."

Commissioner Anderson's jaw dropped with an audible click.

A full minute passed in silence.

"No way."

"It's true. His name is Yosho Masaki."

Tenchi answered while looking pityingly at the kindly, lion-faced humanoid alien.

"The First Prince of the Juraian Royal Family who has been missing for centuries?"

“That’s him.”

“Then you are...”

“Tenchi Masaki. Um, a lot of things happened and I found out. Until then, I lived as a normal human.”

“……”

Is Okayama some kind of cosmic singularity? the Commissioner wondered. It had simply been overlooked because it was in an uncivilized sector. But he never imagined such a development.

“First-Class Detective Mihoshi!!”

Mihoshi jumped at the sudden roar of the Commissioner’s voice. “Yes, sir!”

“Send your report immediately! I shall contact the Grand Commissioner at Headquarters. We must also notify the Juraian Royal Family. Princess Ayeka!”

“Yes?”

“A missing persons report was filed by your father. Until I arrive there, First-Class Detective Mihoshi will act as your guard. Do not take any independent action. Good heavens, what a mess. This is what it means for the universe to be turned upside down. Mihoshi... you’ve done it again.”

The Ansible cut out abruptly.

Everyone looked at each other as if by prior agreement. Suddenly, Ryoko literally leaped into the air.

“This is bad! The police are coming? Ryo-Ohki...!!”

Ayeka tackled her with perfect timing just as she tried to vanish. This was the result of the "learning function" in action.

“The statute of limitations has passed for you, hasn't it? There is no need to run away now.”

“Wh-what?! Let go! Statute or not, I hate the police. I’m not letting them poke and pry into my business!”

“You are a witness to the Kagato incident. An uncooperative attitude would be most unwise. Do you wish to be upgraded to a permanent Most Wanted criminal?”

“Ryoko, why are you getting so flustered? You are currently my property. Leave it to me, your mother.”

“That’s right! Big sis, you did so much. You won't get caught. Sasami guarantees it!”

Everyone began chiming in with their own opinions, and Ryoko lost the energy to even shake off Ayeka’s grip.

The police being kind to me? Where’s the guarantee in that?

Ryoko stole a glance at Tenchi’s face. He noticed her gaze and smiled back warmly. It was the same simple, sincere smile from when he was a child.

There’s no reason to hand a treasure like this over to someone like Ayeka. Reaffirming this, Ryoko cursed herself for trying to run away from that smile. If worst came to worst, she could just kidnap Tenchi and flee. She floated back down and leaned against the man she loved.

“Tenchi... Thinking about leaving you behind and running. I was wrong. I love you.”

Just as Ayeka’s face froze, ready to deliver a final blow...

“Um, could you all be quiet for a moment? If I don't send this report, I’ll be fired.”

There stood Mihoshi, facing the Ansible with a look of seriousness never seen before. It was an unprecedented report that would reportedly bring all normal operations at the station to a standstill.

"Kagato Incident, Resolved!"

"Kagato Incident Resolved! Earthling Boy's Great Feat" "Princess Ayeka Found Safe! Juraian Royal Palace Overjoyed" "A Modern Legend! First Prince of Juraian Royal Family Was Alive!" "Difficult Case Resolved! Legendary Genius Student Washu Appears"

Various headlines danced across screens. From the center of the Galaxy Federation to the furthest reaches of the frontier, the "Tenchi Fever" that enthralled tens of billions of citizens across the galaxy via the Ansible network began this way.

However...

"How is it that something sent with a Top Secret code is gracing the front page of this morning's paper?"

On the morning of January 2nd, Earth time, Commissioner Anderson—who had just arrived at the first lobby of the Galaxy Police Headquarters via emergency transport—turned toward Chief Nobeyama, then shifted his gaze to the beautiful detective, Kiyone.

"Well, I wonder why," Nobeyama muttered, stacking newspapers from various star systems and sounding impressed. "Still, the media's response is certainly fast."

"Well, it's a happy occasion, so isn't it fine?"

The A.N. reception system covering the entire lobby wall was broadcasting special bulletins on the resolution of the Kagato incident in a bilingual format of local and common tongues.

"But really, when you have the Kagato incident resolved, the first and second princesses found safe, the first prince found, the genius Washu found, and a new hero, Tenchi, born... well, it's impossible for people *not* to catch the fever. It's like hitting the mother lode in your own backyard."

"What on earth is that supposed to mean?"

“Oh, it’s a Terrestrial folk saying. I’m a bit of an Earth enthusiast,” Nobeyama said, nodding to himself. “Mihoshi is sure to be promoted. Just as I said, she'll be working at Headquarters. See? It all worked out. Our only loss this time was one patrol ship.”

Commissioner Anderson shook his head in resignation and tapped the shoulder of Kiyone, who had been silently reading the articles.

“Kiyone. Sorry, but could you fetch some coffee? I want to clear my head before the meeting starts.”

“Yes, right away.”

Kiyone looked at the Commissioner with pity, set down the paper, and stood up, glancing at the press corps crowding the second lobby.

“I hear Top Secret code decryption manuals are circulating. It’s a grave problem, but the information leak isn't your responsibility, Commissioner. I’m more worried about what comes next. There will likely be a succession of fools trying to cash in on this frenzy—fans who’ll pay anything for a glimpse of the stars, stowaways, or terrorists sneaking into Special Protected Area tours. There’s no guarantee a second or third kidnapping won't occur. For a while, just patrolling the Earth's vicinity is going to keep our hands full.”

Kiyone called a service robot and ordered three coffees.

“You’re right,” the Commissioner sighed as he sipped the hot coffee. “That’s why I hate the media. They stir things up as much as possible, and then if anything happens, they complain that the Galaxy Police response was poor or slow. Until Mihoshi came along, the Sol System Branch was quiet. I could go home to the dorms on time. But it’s too late for that now.”

“Quiet days will return eventually,” Nobeyama said with a carefree look. “Once the VIPs go home. Besides, I’m just happy I’ll get to set foot on Earth. I probably wouldn't have seen it in my lifetime if not for this. I’m taking a correspondence course in Frontier Cultural Anthropology, you know. I’ll finally get to do some field work. Don't you think, Detective Kiyone?”

“I suppose...”

Kiyone gave a noncommittal answer. *Like subordinate, like superior. Or did he become this way from having to handle all of Mihoshi's complaints? Well, no one with a sane mind could be that girl's boss.* Even so...

"They're late," Kiyone said, looking around. "I wonder how long they intend to keep us waiting."

"They're probably tied up dealing with the media."

Just as the Commissioner was about to ask for a second cup of coffee, an authoritative bass voice echoed.

"What are you all doing lounging around here?!"

"G-Grand Commissioner!"

Mr. Kuramitsu, the top official of the Galaxy Police, gestured to the three who had jumped up reflexively. Accompanied by bodyguards, he began walking toward the transport chute he had just descended from.

"W-we heard there was a meeting..." Commissioner Anderson looked up at the Grand Commissioner as he hurried to catch up.

"A meeting? The meeting is canceled. A venue setup crew has already gone to Earth and is setting up a special field. I want to see my granddaughter's face as soon as possible. A grand achievement! I'm grateful for the results of your training."

"I see..."

The Grand Commissioner laughed heartily, slapped Commissioner Anderson on the back with a large hand, and then lowered his voice.

"A large number of guests have arrived from the Juraian Royal Family. It's too noisy for any meeting. They say they want to confirm the safety of the princesses immediately. Jurai is a planet with a long history. They're also founders of the Union Council. It's a pain if we ignore them. I think the Juraian Royal Palace must be empty right now. The Emperor, the Empress, the whole clan, aides, personal guards, servants—even the cooks have come. They say they'll look after themselves and won't be a burden. Plus, there are the media

reps from every star system. Honestly, I can't keep up. But it would be bad if people thought the Galaxy Police was being run by the Juraian Royal Family.”

“I see.”

As they boarded the Grand Commissioner's private transport chute, Kuramitsu sighed.

“In any case, the best thing is to let the parents and children have their reunion and then get them to leave. If something happens in a place like that, we won't be able to move. Still, I don't understand why they would do something like letting three important heirs be cast out into space. I just don't get it.”

“Maybe it’s a tradition? You know, 'If you love your children, let them travel'...”

“I can't stand being jerked around by tradition.”

“If I may,” Kiyone cut in. “I’m from Jurai. The Juraian Royal Family has specialized ships that only members of the family can use. No one who is not a direct member or a blood relative of the Royal Family can even set foot on them. Intruders are automatically neutralized. Against external attacks, a shield called Lighthawk Wings activates to protect the ship. In terms of defense, they are virtually invincible. The Royal Family has absolute trust in these ships.”

“Hmm. And yet, the first report was that they were in pieces. If not for Mihoshi’s report, a search party large enough to cover the entire Earth might have been dispatched. I don't mean to speak ill of the Juraian Royal Family. I just meant that I don't understand how royalty thinks.”

Kiyone looked back at the Grand Commissioner without a hint of a smile.

“Please don't worry about it. I’m from a commoner background. There are various problems with the monarchy. The Emperor of Jurai rules well, but there are many who don't think so.”

“What do you mean by that?” the Grand Commissioner asked sharply.

Kiyone lowered her voice.

“The members of the Juraian Royal Family live far too long. Two thousand years by galactic standard time. Commoners live two hundred. Nearly ten times as long. The commoner assembly essentially has no power against the royal assembly. The gap between the ruling class and the ruled is too great. In fact...” Kiyone hesitated slightly. “There have been several rebellions in the past. Rebellious elements are still in hiding. For them, this must be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The entire Juraian Royal family is gathering—in a place where all weapons except for self-defense are prohibited by Special Protection ordinances. And the rebels might not just be from Jurai. People from other star systems looking to expand their influence, or even pirates, might be lending a hand. Grand Commissioner, do you understand? This isn't just an internal matter; it’s an international one. Please...”

“Do you have proof?”

“No. I’m only stating the possibility.”

“I see. We’ll do what we can.” The Grand Commissioner nodded encouragingly to Kiyone, ending the discussion. “First-Class Detective Kiyone. You have a strong sense of patriotism, don't you?”

“No. I just hate terrorists.”

Behind that blunt response, the Grand Commissioner read something else—something like a wound that others were not permitted to touch.

“How many years has it been since you paired up with my granddaughter?”

Kiyone’s face softened. “It’s been two years.”

“I’m sorry for all the trouble she’s caused you.”

“No,” Kiyone smiled. “It’s my fault for not being able to keep up with her ideas.”

Mihoshi was, indeed, an excellent detective.

Not a single case had gone unsolved since she joined the force. Her methods were simply... different. While an ordinary detective relied on legwork and deduction, Mihoshi followed her sixth sense and her luck. Criminals tended to

practically walk right into her path. She would encounter them the very second she turned a corner.

For instance, at the exact moment her blaster's energy pack ran dry and she was cornered, a flowerpot—or perhaps a load of laundry—would fall onto the grinning culprit's head. There was even a time when, while she was slurping standing-room soba, the person who squeezed in next to her turned out to be the perpetrator. On that occasion, Mihoshi had hurled her bowl before even drawing her blaster. The bowl proved to have an effect equivalent to a shock gun.

Mihoshi was that kind of detective.

"Grand Commissioner Kuramitsu."

Kiyone smiled. It was the sort of smile that made one feel it was a waste to keep her as a mere detective.

"She seems to operate on a scale far removed from an ordinary person like myself. The station's management computer has reached the same conclusion. It claims the digits in her budget are on a different level... Oh."

Kiyone realized her slip of the tongue and abruptly cut herself off.

"My apologies."

The Grand Commissioner burst out laughing. While laughing, he patted Kiyone on the shoulder and told her it didn't matter.

"I'm counting on you to look after Mihoshi. It's only because she has a partner like you that she can stay on the front lines. Now then."

As they descended the transport chute and walked briskly down a long corridor, the Grand Commissioner murmured to himself.

"It is time for departure. Let us pray to the God of the Galaxy Police for a safe journey."

"What is that?" Commissioner Anderson asked back.

"The Goddess of Fortune. What else could it be?"

This old man must also enjoy the Goddess's favor, Kiyone suddenly thought as she watched the Commissioner's puzzled expression. She felt a certain radiance from him, similar to Mihoshi's. She couldn't quite put into words what it was, though.

"I see. You certainly have a way with words. Let's hope the payout is a large one," Chief Nobeyama quipped.

"That depends entirely on your state of mind," the Grand Commissioner countered. "First, you must believe. Say to yourself, 'I can do this.' The Goddess smiles upon those who love life and never lose hope."

Words that would have made one roll their eyes if spoken by an ordinary person took on a glimmer of truth coming from the Grand Commissioner's mouth. Kiyone felt the love in his voice—the love a grandfather sends to his granddaughter and the world she lives in.

For a moment, Kiyone felt a sharp pang of jealousy toward Mihoshi.

Mihoshi is just too blessed. And the best part is, she doesn't think about a single thing! When we get there, I'm going to have to give her a serious talking-to.

Must be nice. Having someone who loves you this much. While I...

Kiyone shook her head to drive the rest of that thought away. The bulkhead of the teleportation room opened with a mechanical hiss.

"And you see, Pete, if that many people are coming, I don't think they'll fit in the main house."

While slurping cup noodles, Mihoshi waved her chopsticks at the Ansible monitor. Even after sending the report, questions and meetings had continued in a revolving door of interruptions, leaving her unable to leave Washu's laboratory beneath the Masaki residence.

Mihoshi was currently speaking with a man named Peter Finlay, who was in charge of venue setup for the Headquarters Management Division.

“I really think the main hall of the Masaki Shrine would be best. There's a dojo there, too, so it can hold a hundred people. But if they plan to stay the night, they’ll need to bring their own futons. Anything else?”

“We’ll take care of the rest,” the handsome blonde man on the monitor replied. “I’m the man known as the party coordinator of Headquarters. Whether it’s the edge of the galaxy or the belly of a dragon, as long as there’s a space for a venue, I’m good. More importantly, I want to hear about you. You’re only twenty-three, right? It’s amazing that someone so young solved the Kagato incident. You’re truly the Grand Commissioner’s granddaughter. So, do you have a boyfriend?”

“Eh?”

Caught off guard, Mihoshi almost dropped her chopsticks before frantically readjusting her grip.

“You’re transferring to Headquarters, right? I’m so happy. I’ll throw a welcome party for you. Ah, is it that time already? I’ll talk to you directly over there. Sorry, but could you head to the teleport point? We have to set up the special field and everything. See ya, honey.”

The man waved away a subordinate who had come to tell him the time. Having done all the talking, he unilaterally cut the Ansible connection.

“Oh my...”

Mihoshi sat stunned in front of the Ansible for a moment. *Honey? I think he might be misunderstanding something.*

She checked the clock. It was nearly nine-thirty.

“I thought I’d finally get a vacation, but it’s turned out to be even busier.”

Grumbling to herself, Mihoshi nevertheless went upstairs to fetch her coat. From the living room, she could hear laughter from what sounded like a New Year’s television program.

“This has turned into quite a big deal,” Mihoshi sighed, heading outside to prepare the venue—or rather, the banquet hall.

The morning of January 2nd.

The sound of the doorbell roused everyone in the Masaki household.

“Mihoshi! Everyone! Please wake up. You won't make it if you don't hurry.”

The ringing and the cheerful calling continued until the bleary-eyed group gathered at the entrance and Mihoshi opened the door.

“Good morning. I’m Peter Finlay from Headquarters. Please, call me Pete.”

The blonde man continued with a bright expression.

“I will be looking after all of you. Please finish your preparations and head over to the venue. The parties involved are scheduled to arrive in three hours.”

“The venue? The parties involved?”

Tenchi asked back with a look that said he wondered where this man had suddenly sprouted from.

“Oh? You haven't heard anything?” The man replied, his smile unchanging. “That is a problem. Mihoshi?”

“Oh... um, I got back late yesterday, so I was going to wake up early and tell them...”

Mihoshi realized she had forgotten to set her alarm.

“I wonder what time it is. What? It’s already ten? You see, Tenchi, my Grandpa and Princess Ayeka’s parents are coming. So, I thought I had to tell you, but...”

“Today?” Tenchi asked. His head was still in a fog.

Yesterday had been an exhausting day. There was the incident with Ryoko, Ayeka and Ryoko’s fight, Mihoshi contacting the Galaxy Police via Washu’s Ansible, and then he had ended up falling asleep after getting a bit tipsy...

Galaxy Police?

The man in front of him suddenly connected to yesterday's events. After that, they had all moved to the living room so as not to disturb Mihoshi while she

wrote her report, and that had been the end of it. What exactly had happened during the rest of the night?

“Um, Detective?” Tenchi called out tentatively.

“I’m not a detective. I’m from Management. Please call me Pete. If possible, I’d like you to call me 'Pete the Tylor.' I really respect that man, you know. You know, the one from the United Planets Space Force...”

“???”

Question marks appeared over the faces of Tenchi and everyone else present. For those who might know the reference, we shall refrain from touching upon this issue. Surely, in this man’s head, this universe was connected to a completely different one.

At any rate.

“Well, it’s fine. There's still plenty of time. My apologies, but could I have a cup of coffee? I only got three hours of sleep last night.”

Pete’s knowledge of Earth—specifically Japanese houses—was more accurate than a foreigner of the same era. He quickly took off his shoes, found a pair of slippers to change into, and started walking toward the kitchen.

“Wow, thanks!”

As soon as he took a sip of the hot coffee, Pete grinned.

“Princess Sasami of Jurai, I think you’ll make a great wife someday.”

Sasami smiled and brought out some cookies as a special service.

“I’m happy you’re praising me, big brother, but Sasami likes Big Brother Tenchi. If you play with me, though, I might consider it.”

“Ah-ha. That’s a tough one. What do you want to play?” Pete asked, popping a cookie into his mouth without hesitation.

“Hmm... Take me someplace like an amusement park. Or an arcade. Sasami and the others have only gone to a hot spring once; we haven't gone anywhere else.”

“Well, I’d have to ask your parents about that... If they give permission.”

“Aw, that’s boring.”

Sasami pulled out a box of cereal, poured milk over it, and began to eat. “Do you want some too, big brother?”

Pete nodded gratefully, so Sasami ended up putting out another bowl and spoon. Pete heaped cereal into the bowl with practiced ease, poured the milk, and began to eat, looking as though it didn't taste particularly good.

“Big brother, have you been to Earth before?”

Sasami gazed curiously at the blonde man, who could have passed for a New Yorker if not for his slightly pointed ears.

“No, I haven't. Why?” Pete asked back with his mouth full.

“Because you seem to know everything about our house, and the way you’re eating that is like you eat it all the time.”

Pete finished his cereal, wiped his mouth with a nearby cloth, and gave her a kind smile.

“This kind of 'bachelor food' doesn't change much regardless of the planet. My wish is to escape this kind of breakfast. Dry food and protein drinks. It’s like feeding yourself as if you’re a pet. To put it simply, it lacks love.”

“Hmm...”

I don't really get it, Sasami thought as she poured him a refill of coffee. “Should Sasami be your friend?”

Happy to have found a new playmate, Sasami added very generously, “I can even make breakfast for you.”

Pete nearly spilled his coffee. He pushed the cup to a safe distance and wagged a finger at Sasami.

“You mustn't. You have to save things like that until you find someone truly important. You’re a Princess of Jurai, right? If you say things like that as a greeting, you’ll have so many people wanting you to make them breakfast that you’ll have to hand out numbered tickets to keep the line in order.”

Sasami burst out laughing. Her innocent smile brought a touch of hope to Pete’s heart.

“Princess Sasami. Could you introduce me to your older sister? Even if a 'Roman Holiday' is out of the question, I might be able to manage an 'Okayama Holiday.'”

“Oh, I know that! I saw it on TV the other day. You know a lot, big brother.”

“My library is a bit full of cult-classics.”

“But Big Sister is no good to pursue. She likes Big Brother Tenchi.”

Pete didn't seem particularly disappointed and moved to his next question. “Has your sister ever liked someone like that before?!”

“No. Big Sister is super serious. That’s why it’s a big deal once she makes up her mind. That’s why she gets into fights with Big Sister Ryoko.”

“Big Sister Ryoko... as in Ryoko the former space pirate?”

“Yeah.”

“Does Ryoko like Tenchi, too?”

“Yeah...”

Sasami’s face suddenly turned serious as she leaned toward Pete.

“Big brother. The Galaxy Police detectives won't arrest Big Sister Ryoko, will they? 'Statute of limitations' means it’s okay now, right? Big Sister is actually a good person. She’s a bit quick-tempered, though. If Big Sister Ryoko gets caught, Ryo-Ohki would cry. Even Sasami might cry. Because I love Big Sister.”

“Hmm...” Pete scratched his blonde hair, looking troubled.

It would have been easy to lie to the girl to avoid hurting her. However, Pete knew that if she discovered the lie later, her heart would be wounded even more deeply. He decided to offer a compromise.

“The big shots at the Galaxy Police don't really care about Ryoko for the time being. It's true that all the crimes from her pirate days are past the statute of limitations. So, she won't be arrested. However, there are still a lot of unanswered questions, so if she stays here, she'll likely be asked a lot of things. In the worst-case scenario, other crimes might come to light, and things could get complicated. But if she hasn't done anything bad since then, I think she'll be fine. I think running away would actually make things worse.”

“Big Sister said she hates being questioned. If that’s the case, her only choice is to run, right?”

“Wait. There's more.” Pete raised a finger and smiled warmly. “Instead of running away, she can just hide. The big shots will be busy with all sorts of business, so as long as she doesn't show her face, they'll probably just forget about Ryoko and go home. But...” Pete whispered. “Don't talk about Ryoko. You should probably tell the others that, too. Think you can do it?”

“Well, I appreciate that.”

Suddenly, a voice rang out from thin air, and Ryoko materialized right on top of the table.

“Big Sister Ryoko!!” Sasami shouted in exasperation. “Were you eavesdropping? You're not supposed to do that! Big Sister said so!”

Pete looked up at the famous space pirate, who possessed a physique hiding a powerful spring-like energy and rather sharp features, and wondered how he should greet her. Ryoko looked Pete over without any reservation.

“I hope you're not trying to set a trap. I'm not the kind of idiot who gets caught by the Galaxy Police.”

Pete answered with a slight touch of offense. “Hardly. Haven't I said many times that I'm not a detective? Everything I just told Princess Sasami is the truth. If you want to be caught, I can introduce you to a good detective.”

Ryoko gave a smirk and suddenly teleported right next to Pete.

“My bad. I just didn't think anyone from the police could be kind.”

“It’s also my first time meeting a famous pirate.” Pete held out his hand. “I’m impressed. You have supernatural powers. If it’s alright with you, I’ll help out. My power isn't much, though. Of course, you probably don't need any help.”

Ryoko nervously shook his hand for just a split second before quickly pulling it back. Pete did not miss that gesture.

“You’re quite fastidious. Do I look like such a bad guy to you?”

“Why is a guy from the Management Division carrying a blaster?”

Pete pressed his hand over his loose uniform. “This? It’s government-issue. Even I need something to protect myself. Carrying weapons for self-defense is permitted even in Special Protected Areas. Do you have X-ray vision, too?”

Ryoko narrowed her eyes. *I don’t like this guy. He pretends to be a jokester, but he has a dangerous scent about him.* He wasn't an enemy. However, she couldn't figure out his true identity.

“...Well, let's just leave it at that.”

Suddenly, Ryoko vanished.

“Big Sister?” Sasami looked around in surprise. “Don't mind her. It seems Big Sister Ryoko didn't learn much in the way of manners.”

“I don't mind,” Pete replied. “In fact, I'm relieved now that I know more about her. The detectives at our station probably couldn't handle her anyway. I'm really glad she’s retired from piracy.”

Pete stood up and gestured to Sasami. “Want to go see the venue? Princess Ayeka probably isn't finished getting ready yet. Ah, honey. Are you ready?”

The last words were directed at Mihoshi, who had just entered the kitchen.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Pete,” Mihoshi lowered her head solemnly. “I overslept...”

“Oh, it’s fine,” Pete replied with a light wave of his hand. “By the way, are you good at cooking?”

“Eh?”

“No, I was just asking. Please guard Princess Ayeka.”

Sasami turned around. “Oh, that’s right. Big Sister Ryoko said she’s going to hide for a while. Tell Big Brother Tenchi, too.”

The two of them left.

“What was that about?” Mihoshi muttered toward the messy table. *What a strange guy. Is he trying to hit on me? I’ll admit he’s efficient, though*.

Mihoshi thought of the main hall, which had been transformed into a grand banquet room, and couldn't help but smile. “Oh well. It’s not like he’s doing any harm.”

Lumping the banquet hall and Pete together in her mind, Mihoshi brought out a new bowl and spoon and began eating her breakfast. It was a refreshing morning.

Meanwhile, Tenchi, who had finished dressing, was in his father Nobuyuki’s room, watching his father’s back with irritation as the man stood with arms crossed in front of a wardrobe.

“Tenchi. Do you think a kimono would be better after all? It’s strange to wear a suit during the first three days of the New Year.”

“Either one is fine,” Tenchi answered curtly. “I’ve been meaning to ask... Dad, did you know about Grandpa?”

“What’s that?” Nobuyuki turned around while pulling on the sleeves of a kimono.

“About Grandpa being Yosho. If I carry the blood of the Juraian Royal Family, then you do too, right? Shouldn't you be the prince of Jurai?”

“Is that what this is about?” Nobuyuki poked his head into the wardrobe, answering as he searched for a sash. “Of course I knew. But I thought telling you would only confuse you. Your mother told me not to tell you, either.”

“Mom did? Mom knew too?”

“Tenchi. You seem to be misunderstanding something.” Unable to find the sash, Nobuyuki gave up and began taking off the kimono. “I have nothing to do with the Juraian Royal Family. It was your mother who was a princess of Jurai.”

“Mom was?!” Tenchi reflexively stood up. “Mom was Grandpa’s daughter?!”

“That’s right.” Nobuyuki, now in his underwear, began folding the kimono. “Tenchi, come here for a second. I’ll teach you the proper way to fold a kimono.”

“That doesn't matter. Dad... why did Mom keep it a secret?”

Nobuyuki finished folding the kimono in silence, then took out his work clothes from the wardrobe: a black high-neck sweater, beige chinos, and a herringbone jacket.

“Your mother knew her life wouldn't be long. It seems the water on Earth didn't agree with her. I don't really understand that part myself. She just didn't want you to worry unnecessarily. She said it was enough if you grew up healthy as a normal human. She was worried about what would happen after she was gone and told me many times to find a second wife.”

With his shoulders slumped slightly, Nobuyuki murmured. “I never felt like doing that, and I have no intention of doing so in the future. If I could see your mother one more time, I’d give up even this head of mine.”

Dad... Tenchi stared at his father’s back and swallowed his words. He had never thought about that. He had assumed his father didn't remarry because of him. *I... what a child I’ve been.*

“Dad... I’m sorry.”

“What for, all of a sudden?” Nobuyuki turned around. The weight of the long years since losing his wife cast a shadow over his usually cheerful face.

“I was only thinking about myself... I never thought about your feelings. Even today, I... I was anxious. You know, Princess Ayeka’s parents are coming. The Emperor and Empress of Jurai are my relatives. I was wondering what I’d do if they suddenly told me I was the heir and had to come to Jurai...” Tenchi hesitated. He felt like a complete coward. “It’s too much. Being told I'm a

prince of Jurai starting today and having a marriage partner decided for me... I thought you would handle things well, Dad... no, I was going to push it all on you and run away myself."

"Tenchi." Nobuyuki's warm hand rested on his shoulder. "That kind side of you is just like your mother. I'm not a member of the Juraian Royal Family, so I can't say anything about the right of succession or matters like that. But shouldn't you clearly say so when you think you dislike something? I have no intention of letting you, who has just turned sixteen, be sent elsewhere. I intend to say that much clearly. I think Grandpa feels the same way."

Tenchi looked up in surprise.

"You don't have to settle on just one girl, either. But choose your first kiss partner carefully. You might end up strangling yourself otherwise. If it were me, I'd pick Mihoshi. She's quite mature in her own way. You'd probably feel at ease. Well, that's something you have to decide for yourself."

"Dad!" Tenchi blushed, realizing his father watched him much more closely than he had thought. How did he even know he hadn't had his first kiss yet? *This makes me look like a total kid.* "That kind of thing..."

"Now then, shall we go eat?"

Tenchi found himself unable to say anything else and stood up sullenly. Nobuyuki peered at the chair Tenchi had been sitting on and muttered in exasperation.

"So it was here." On the cushion was the sash, crushed flat. "This is what happens in an all-male household." Nobuyuki grumbled as he scooped up the sash and ended up tossing it into the wardrobe in a ball. "Tenchi. You're our star of hope. Don't go off as a groom. Find a good wife and bring her here. If possible, a kind wife who will feed Grandpa porridge even if he becomes a senile old man."

"What about you, Dad?" Tenchi opened the door, almost bursting into laughter.

"Me? I'll be soaking in happiness while looking at my wife's backside."

An image of a happy backside in a miniskirt floated through Tenchi's mind. It was a mellow, plump backside, different from both Ryoko's and Ayeka's.

“Ayeka!”

In the center of the Masaki Shrine grounds, a tall figure materialized through an open gate.

“Ayeka!!” Another slender silhouette materialized.

“Father! Mother!”

Ayeka and Sasami, dressed in the formal attire of the Juraian Royal Family, ran forward.

“I’ve longed to see you.”

Held in the arms of the strong man wearing magnificent clothing, Ayeka unexpectedly felt like she might cry.

“I’m sorry for causing you worry. As you can see, I am well. Sasami, too...”

“Mother! ♡” Sasami was being held by the Empress, her mother, a look of supreme happiness on her face.

“It is fine, it is fine. One look at your face and it is obvious there is nothing to fear.” The Emperor of Jurai stroked his daughter’s glossy hair and embraced her again as if he could not treasure her enough.

“Father, you know what? Sasami made so many friends since coming here!” Sasami slid down from her mother’s arms and pointed toward Tenchi and the others who were lined up surrounding them. “There’s Big Brother Tenchi, and Ms. Mihoshi, and Grandpa, and Father, and Ryo-Ohki, and Big Sister Ryoko, and Big Brother Pete from the Galaxy Police.”

“What? Did you say Ryoko?”

“Ah!” Sasami covered her mouth. *Oh no. Even though I was the one who told everyone to keep quiet.*

The Emperor of Jurai looked around with a stern expression. “Ryoko! Where are you? Show yourself. Otherwise, in the name of Azusa, Emperor of Jurai, I shall brand you a permanent criminal!”

The members of the Juraian Royal Family and the Galaxy Police standing nearby began to murmur. To the Juraian Royal Family, Ryoko was a hateful criminal. Even if she couldn't be officially arrested, there was bound to be trouble. Everyone thought so.

Sasami turned pale, realizing her slip of the tongue had brought about a dire situation. “Father! Please don't catch Big Sister Ryoko. She’s Sasami’s friend. She helped Big Sister Ayeka. She’s not a bad pirate anymore!” Sasami pleaded desperately.

Ayeka stared at her younger sister in surprise. *This child... she’s defending Ryoko. Sure, I thought it would be fine if Ryoko got into trouble with the Galaxy Police, but I didn't want her to be made a permanent criminal.*

If someone became a permanent criminal, pursuers would be sent to every corner of the universe. There was no statute of limitations. One would be hunted until death—no, even after death. And to track permanent criminals, the Juraian Royal Family had its own unique method: the hounds known as Thought-Sensitivity Waves. Distance and space did not exist for Thought-Sensitivity Waves. No one had ever escaped them.

Beyond the normal police, the Juraian Royal Family had servants who served only the royalty: an elite group called "Sensitives." Ayeka had never seen one, but she knew they existed. Being hunted by a Sensitive was synonymous with a death sentence. She hated Ryoko, but that was too much. Because...

Ayeka grudgingly admitted her feelings to herself. *If she’s gone, I won't have anyone left to fight with. That monster woman is the only one who doesn't bow and scrape to me, the First Princess of Jurai.*

Just as Ayeka resolved to reluctantly take up the labor of defending her, Ryoko suddenly appeared before the Emperor of Jurai.

“Emperor of Jurai, hey, isn't that going a bit far?” With a somewhat grim expression and arms crossed, Ryoko stepped forward. “I’m sorry for attacking the Juraian Royal Palace. But that was seven hundred years ago. I’ve changed. Being a space pirate is ancient history.” Ryoko looked straight up into the

Emperor's face. "The first and last man who controlled me and stole my freedom has vanished from this universe. I have no intention of returning to piracy. But I have no intention of bowing my head to the Emperor of Jurai to receive my freedom, either. That's all I have to say."

The Emperor looked back at Ryoko with a stern face. "Do you know of the Sensitives, the executioners of the Juraian Royal Family?"

"I've heard of them. The Hounds of Death."

"If you become a permanent criminal, you will be hunted until you die. Even so, you say you will not beg for forgiveness?"

"That's right. When I die, the Hounds of Death will die too."

"What magnificent courage." The Emperor suddenly grabbed Ryoko's shoulders and peered into her golden eyes. "You have the spirit of the founder of the Juraian Royal Family. Above all, the spirit of a sailor who loved freedom. Where did you acquire such a thing? I heard that you were a created being."

"That's true. But I have lived through two thousand years of time like this[1]. I am a single life. There is no one else like me. If I lose my freedom, I will vanish once more." Ryoko looked back into the Emperor's deep crimson eyes. "It is a freedom I won at the risk of my life. I won't give it to anyone. I have no intention of atoning for my crimes if it means throwing away that freedom."

The hands grabbing Ryoko's shoulders tightened their grip. Then, the hands suddenly let go, and Ryoko nearly stumbled.

"Very well. Ryoko. Your crimes shall not be questioned." The Emperor turned toward everyone and announced in a loud voice. "From this moment on, this person shall be welcomed as a friend of the Emperor of Jurai. Treat her as befits a guest."

The members of the Juraian Royal Family murmured. A person with a criminal record as a space pirate had been forgiven and called a friend.

"Father!" Sasami ran to her father, her face glowing. The Emperor's powerful hands lifted Sasami up effortlessly. "Sasami. Are you that happy?"

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[1] This 2000 years nonsense doesn't hold up as canonical even in this canon.

Sasami wrapped her arms around her father’s neck and gave him a kiss of gratitude. “Thank you, Father.”

“I did not forgive her for your sake,” the Emperor began to say, but his eyes softened kindly. “That person won it with her own character. She showed courage befitting a friend of yours. Ryoko!”

The Emperor set Sasami down and took the hand of Ryoko, who was stunned by the unexpected turn of events. “Let us celebrate the path that walks in the light together, and pray that no dark shadows of betrayal fall upon it.”

Ryoko was startled. By calling her a friend, this man had made her promise to atone. Not harming the Juraian Royal Family was the entirety of the word "friend." If she betrayed that word, this man would send pursuers after her without hesitation. Ryoko was amazed, realizing the caliber of a man who was a King. *He’s worlds apart from Ayeka. It’s frustrating, but it can’t be helped. Oh well. I’ve quit being a pirate anyway.*

That complex thought must have shown on her face. The Emperor gave Ryoko a smirk, then quickly turned on his heel and gave a graceful bow toward Grand Commissioner Kuramitsu.

“My deepest apologies for making you wait over such a trivial matter. I shall be your partner at the banquet. Come, Ms. Mihoshi, as well.”

Tenchi, caught between his grandfather and father, watched this series of exchanges in a daze. *I don't know what kind of planet Jurai is, but a King who rules the whole world is something else...*

Just as that simple thought was turning into admiration, Ryoko suddenly squeezed in to Tenchi’s right and poked him in the side.

“Tenchi. Pull yourself together! Listen, I don't care what that old man says, don't you dare get engaged. You’ll be locked away in the Juraian Royal Palace and never be able to come back!”

“Wh-what are you talking about?”

Tenchi looked around nervously.

“Ryoko. Don't say such weird things. He can hear you.”

At that moment, the Emperor of Jurai turned around.

“My sons. Come. Let us fill the void of these long years spent so far apart.”

The Emperor peered into each of their faces in turn.

“Yosho. And Tenchi. You protected my daughters and brought them safely back to my hands. I must offer my thanks. Tenchi.”

The Emperor called out to him.

“You who carry the blood of the Juraian Royal Family and the power of the Shadow Star[2]. Come with me and speak. Tell me how you defeated Kagato.”

Ayeka, who had been waiting behind her father, knew the time had come to put the plan she had been harboring in secret into action.

As if to interrupt her father’s words, Ayeka approached Tenchi, took his hand, and pulled him forward to stand before the Emperor. Then, she proudly took her place to Tenchi’s left—the position known in the Juraian Royal Family as the seat of the wife.

“Father. This is the man I love. Please, give your blessing to our engagement.”

“My, Ayeka!”

The Empress raised both hands in surprise.

“U-um...”

Tenchi was stunned by this bombshell declaration. Speechless, he stole a glance at Ayeka’s face.

Ayeka clung tightly to Tenchi as if to show off to Ryoko on the opposite side. She took his hand and enveloped it in her own.

“Lord Tenchi is one who carries the blood of my brother, Yosho. And he is the one who saved my life. There is no one more suitable to be my husband than

[2] This is never elaborated on as far as I know

this man. Ayeka wishes to follow him. Please, understand your daughter's heart."

Ayeka gave a graceful bow.

On the other side, Ryoko's hair stood on end.

Damn it, this girl... I thought she was being awfully quiet, so this was her scheme. Why, you...! Even if I'm hunted to the ends of the universe, I'll smash this to pieces.

Seeing Ryoko's face trembling with rage, Ayeka smiled radiantly. That smile spoke more eloquently than anything else of the thoughts in Ayeka's heart.

Hmph.

If you thought I'd just take it lying down, you were dead wrong.

You might have tried to suck up to Father, but I'm different.

Ryoko.

It seems you underestimated me.

Comparing his daughter's triumphant face with Tenchi's dazed expression, the Emperor of Jurai instinctively took a step back.

"Misaki. Escort everyone. Prepare the banquet."

Signaling to the Empress and the attendants with a wave of his hand, the Emperor climbed the stairs of the main hall with an air of unnecessary haste.

"Now, Lord Tenchi."

Ayeka pulled on Tenchi's hand.

"Wait, Ayeka!"

It was just as Tenchi, having come to his senses, tried to shake off her hand.

A surge of media personnel rushed in like a tidal wave, surrounding Tenchi.

"Mr. Tenchi! How do you feel right now?!"

“When did you win Princess Ayeka’s heart?!”

“Is it true you carry the blood of the Juraian Royal Family?!”

“Give us your thoughts on becoming the heir to Jurai!”

“Princess Ayeka, look this way, please!”

Flashes popped and cameras rolled.

“W-wait, please wait...”

Even so, Tenchi looked around for an escape route while shielding Ayeka from the press. Ayeka herself clung tightly to Tenchi, flashing smiles in response to the media’s requests.

“Everyone, Lord Tenchi is tired. Please wait until Father makes a formal announcement later. If we linger here, Father will scold us. Please make way.”

While handling the reporters who were clamoring for "just one more word," Ayeka took Tenchi’s hand and began walking quickly up the stairs of the main hall. Immediately, the Juraian Royal Guards rushed over and barred the journalists from following.

“Big Sister really went for it, didn't she?”

Leaving her mother’s side as she discussed something with Grand Commissioner Kuramitsu, Sasami fell into step with Mihoshi, who had begun walking toward the main hall.

“Mihoshi, I'm sorry. Sasami didn't think Big Sister would do something so extreme. I bet Big Brother Tenchi is angry, too.”

“Yeah...”

Hearing a response that was uncharacteristically weak for Mihoshi, Sasami stopped and looked up at her older friend’s face.

“It’s okay. It’s not your fault, Sasami.”

Despite her dejected voice, Mihoshi managed a smile for Sasami.

“Big Sister Ryoko’s hair was standing on end, wasn't it?”

“Yeah...”

“Sasami doesn't want to think about it.”

“Me neither,” Mihoshi replied.

In the midst of the chaos, it seemed Ryoko had vanished again.

Mihoshi looked around. Then, her eyes fell upon Kiyone, who was caught in a scuffle with the media and shouting insults at them.

“Sasami, you go on ahead.”

Mihoshi turned on her heel and ran off as soon as she spoke.

I can't stand the thought of sitting next to Princess Ayeka and Tenchi while they're lined up together, forcing a smile. I need Kiyone. It would be better to have Kiyone nagging me about this and that. I’ll call Commissioner Anderson and Chief Nobeyama, too. If I do that, I can talk properly and pull myself together like a detective should.

Her vision suddenly blurred.

This isn't fair at all. No one can compete with a daughter of the Emperor of Jurai. But then, Mihoshi remembered that she, too, was the granddaughter of Grand Commissioner Kuramitsu. She calmed herself down a bit, slowed her pace, and wiped her tears with her uniform sleeve.

“If I show a face like this, Kiyone will have something to say again. And Grandpa will, too.”

Bravely, Mihoshi shook her head and forced a smile, then began walking straight ahead.

Meanwhile, Sasami, having been suddenly left behind by Mihoshi, realized there was no one left to keep her company.

“Honestly, Big Sister Ayeka is such an idiot.”

Sasami turned to head up the stairs of the main hall but suddenly remembered her new friend.

“Big Brother Pete. Where are you?”

Sasami looked around. She realized she hadn't seen Pete since the teleportation gates began to open.

“I wonder where that man went?”

With a sigh, Sasami opened the doors to the main hall.

Neither Sasami, nor anyone else in the midst of the confusion, had any way of knowing that Peter Finlay of the Headquarters Management Division—the self-proclaimed "Pete"—was moving about with a very specific mission.

The Banquet Began.

The banquet began.

The main hall, prepared through the cooperation of Pete’s team and the servants of the Juraian Royal Family, was decorated with beautiful Juraian-style furnishings and a large quantity of vividly colored fabrics. Graceful drapes of tapestries with subtle shifts in hue hung on the walls, layering over one another to create the feeling of being in a spring forest in full bloom.

The guest seating consisted of soft circular rugs and low round tables placed upon them, arranged irregularly in order of precedence. The sight of people gathered around the tables, swaying as they enjoyed the feast, brought to mind various flowers floating in the dappled sunlight. Even the drab uniforms of the Galaxy Police looked like eccentric guests visiting an exotic forest in this setting.

However, if one peered into the shadows of the translucent drapes, the loyal Juraian Royal Guards stood like trees, and one would realize that this forest was protected by swords and loyalty.

Outside the main hall, the Galaxy Police security detail secured key points, taking care that the banquet was not disturbed by anyone. Of course, thanks to the special field covering a one-kilometer radius, the Masaki home and shrine should have appeared deserted, so no one approached.

the security officers stood quietly, looking somewhat bored. Just then, a blonde man appeared and spoke to one of the guards.

“Hey, thanks for the hard work. Any suspicious characters?”

“No.”

The young guard replied curtly. He did not like this man. He had sucked up to Grand Commissioner Kuramitsu with smooth talk and followed him wherever he went—and on the ridiculous pretext of being a "party coordinator" at that. Whenever he saw a woman, he used his bachelor status to the fullest and flirted with everyone. "Not for sale" or "already taken" meant nothing to him.

To this man’s eyes, every young woman probably looked like they were hanging a "SALE" tag.

“Is there something you need?”

The guard asked back with a tone that said, *if you don't have business, leave already.*

“No, not particularly. It’s a nice day, isn't it?”

With a face that seemed completely unfazed, Pete strolled away toward the back area. The guard watched his retreating figure with cold eyes, then returned to his tedious job.

He did not notice.

He didn't notice the chill that flowed in, as if the sun had momentarily been eclipsed. That chill stagnated in a blind spot for the guards, forming a hazy figure. It remained there for a while, as if observing the main hall. Then, it vanished like a flowing mist.

The tranquility filled afternoon returned once more.

Tenchi felt as if the left side of his body had gone stiff as he listened to the Emperor of Jurai’s jokes.

“Speaking of squid... I used to do this a lot as a kid. Are you 'squid-y' yet? Just kidding!”

Since no one laughed, the Emperor added more.

“'Squid-ly' harmony! A typhoon 'squid'! Watermelon in the summer!”

Silence fell over the round table.

“The Great Majin is 'squid-ing'! Perestroi-squid! 'Squid' the rest!”

The silence deepened further.

“...I'm 'squid-y' tired. I find it 'un-squid-able'.”

After waiting a moment, the Emperor muttered to himself.

“Well, whatever 'squid'.”

Half of the people surrounding the table toppled over.

“Ahaha, ha...”

Tenchi felt like his HP had dropped to single digits. He could tell his own face was twitching. He was already reeling from Ayeka’s critical hit earlier, and now the perpetrator herself was sitting next to him, leaning against his shoulder—on top of this pun attack. If he took any more damage, he doubted even the Temple of Kant could revive him.

My level is still too low.

Tenchi desperately drained his cup and regained a little vitality. Every time he looked at the Emperor sitting across from him, he became conscious of the soft touch of the cheek against his left shoulder and the presence of the hand placed on his knee.

To make matters worse, Tenchi alone remained in a formal seiza position. Even though he trained daily, such training had no effect when his mind was so scattered. His legs were going numb. But thinking of Ayeka next to him, he couldn't bring himself to even shift.

“That’s right. Let me tell you another joke passed down in the Juraian Royal Family. One day, a package from an unknown sender was delivered to the Royal Family. The Lord Chamberlain, feeling suspicious, opened the package and a humble box came out. When he opened the box, there was a single piece of paper inside. On that paper, it was written...”

The Emperor began to sing.

“I came so faaaa-r, but it’s oooo-nly a booooo-x...”

Grand Commissioner Kuramitsu, who had been leaning in to listen next to him, toppled over.

“You!”

The Empress, sitting to the left, turned an icy gaze toward her husband.

“You’re always like this when you have something to drink!”

“Misaki. Don't be so angry. It’s a rare chance to relax,” the Emperor muttered under his breath, and helped the Grand Commissioner up while he was at it.

“I thought the Emperor of Jurai was a scary person, but he has quite a friendly personality, doesn't he?”

That was Mihoshi, sitting next to the Grand Commissioner. It seemed she had recovered a little from the shock of Ayeka’s bombshell declaration earlier.

“Well, he is my biological father, after all.”

Katsuhito, sitting to Tenchi’s right, took up the conversation. Thanks to the seven hundred years he had spent on Earth, he had become older than his own father; and his personality, which had been serious like his mother's in his youth, seemed to have completely returned to its original state.

“Like father, like grandpa, I guess,” Tenchi thought as he looked at the Emperor’s face and then at the Empress’s.

There was no doubt Ayeka took after her mother. Not in looks, but in personality. Whether that should be called a blessing or a misfortune, he didn't know yet.

“Lord Tenchi. Why are you daydreaming?”

Ayeka snuggled closer. Her weight shifted, and a sickeningly itchy numbness shot through Tenchi’s legs.

“A-Ayeka. Please don't lean on me so much. My legs...”

“Eh?”

“My legs...”

Still clutching Ayeka’s hand which was on his knee, Tenchi lost his balance and fell backward onto the lap of Katsuhito, who was sitting next to him, taking Ayeka with him.

“Kyah!”

The two struggled as they became entangled. If no one else were around, and if this weren't on Katsuhito's lap, the scene from here on would be cut, and this book would likely continue with blank pages for a while to allow everyone to fill them in as they pleased.

Unfortunately, Katsuhito's smirk interrupted.

"You two are being a bit hasty."

Katsuhito helped up the princess, who was red to her ears, and the near-death prince.

"I-I'm sorry."

"No..."

Tenchi nodded, slowly extending his legs, which were still throbbing with numbness, to a safe distance.

It's no use. If I stay here, I'll become a vegetable. Am I cursed to keep digging one grave after another?

"Lord Tenchi, you must eat more, or it will be bad for your health."

Ayeka, seemingly intending to gloss over the previous incident, began to fuss over Tenchi with an strangely devoted air.

"What do you think you're doing, Big Sister?" Sasami's voice rose in exasperation.

"In other words, that's what you call a 'standard pattern'," Washu remarked nonchalantly.

"Kiyone, so anyway, what were we talking about earlier?"

"Mihoshi. Just shut up and drink more!"

Kiyone, who had just been told the story of Mihoshi's heartbreak, looked at Mihoshi's twitching smile and added: "A vacation. A vacation. We're working too hard. Let's the two of us take a break and go to the hot springs on the Jurak Line."

“Speaking of which, I haven't done anything for my family in years,” Commissioner Anderson continued. “How about we take a vacation here? I believe this planet was supposed to have a famous hot spring. You know, the one Mihoshi went to...”

“It’s the Kamidake Onsen.”

Nobuyuki took over Chief Nobeyama’s question. “That place is great. Well, for the Commissioner, it might be a bit difficult with that face, but as long as everyone wears normal clothes, you can soak in the hot spring while drinking great local sake. It’s the ultimate luxury.”

“My, Uncle. I’m so happy.”

Ayeka looked down, blushing, as she snuggled up to Tenchi once more.

Everyone began to chat harmoniously.

Only Ryoko had not said a word for a while, nor had she touched the food. She sat drinking desperately with a face like a dark cloud.

What is this? This atmosphere. This 'at-home' mood, as if all of humanity is part of the Jurai clan. Especially that two-shot of Tenchi and that damn Ayeka, looking like they're decorated on a doll stand.

Ryoko’s eyes grew sharp, and her pupils gave off golden sparks.

“Hot springs? Ayeka, shall I remind you one more time? This time for sure, I’ll call up some monsters and demons that'll make you flip! I’ll sink that conceited face of yours to the bottom of the tub!”

Her promise to the Emperor of Jurai had long since vanished from her mind.

“Oh, are you talking about that amusing little show?” Ayeka shrugged her shoulders. “It seems you still don't understand. No one is asking you to come. Do you understand? You are not invited. I refuse. You’re in the way.”

Ayeka indulged herself in the fine wine of revenge to her heart’s content. Ryoko’s face turned pale with anger and frustration.

“Ayeka! Don't say such unrefined things. Ryoko, please forgive her.”

The Empress, using a woman’s intuition, tried to save her daughter from the cornered rat that was on the verge of biting.

At that moment.

“Hot springs?” Mihoshi murmured. “Kamidake Onsen...?”

Suddenly, Mihoshi burst into tears.

“Waaaaah, Tenchi! I... I liked you too, Tenchi! I thought we’d go back to Kamidake Onsen once I got a vacation... It’s too much. To have a broken heart before I even confessed...!”

Mihoshi sobbed, wiping her endlessly flowing tears on the shoulder of Kiyone’s uniform.

“N-now, Mihoshi. What are you saying?!”

Grand Commissioner Kuramitsu was horrified and placed a hand on his granddaughter’s shoulder.

“No way! I’m just a clumsy, slow turtle anyway. After I finally, finally found someone I loved, he’s being snatched away by a hawk right before my eyes!”

Mihoshi hugged Kiyone tightly.

“It’s fine! I’m going to live for my work. Kiyone, let’s lead a pure and righteous life together. I won’t forgive you if you try to steal a lead on me!”

“W-wait a minute. I didn't promise anything like that...”

“Are you saying you won't? Oh, you heartless person!”

“Mihoshi, by any chance, is that 'hawk' supposed to be me?”

Ayeka’s willow-like eyebrows arched in anger.

“Hahahaha! This is rich. Hey, Ayeka! Do you seriously think Tenchi would ever choose someone like you? My Tenchi chooses his own lovers for himself. Right, Tenchi?”

Ryoko looked at Tenchi with a face full of naked malice.

“Uh...”

Am I a piece of fried tofu?

If he was the tofu and Ayeka was the hawk, then what on earth was Ryoko? A vulture?

“Lord Tenchi! Are you just going to let her say those things? Say something!”

“Waaaah, Tenchi, you dummy! Dummy, dummy!”

“Ayeka! What is the meaning of this? Do you intend to marry him without even confirming the boy's feelings?”

“Tenchi! Don't tell me you've been deceiving my daughter...”

“Heh heh heh, Emperor of Jurai. This Ryoko is taking Tenchi for herself!”

Frenzy is contagious. This is known as the First Law of Frenzy. Confusion breeds confusion. This is known as the Second Law of Confusion. At this rate, the chaos looked ready to summon a rain of blood.

“Stop it! Everyone, listen to me. Dammit, I said listen!!”

Tenchi shouted in spite of himself. For a moment, the bickering ceased.

“I’m only sixteen years old! Why do I have to decide such important things like engagements and marriage right now? Ayeka, you're one thing, but Ryoko, you're just as bad! Stop fighting over me without even hearing my feelings! That goes for you too, Mihoshi and Washu. I might be indecisive, it's true. But even if you tell me to pick just one person out of everyone I love, I just can't do it. Please, just leave me alone. If you can't do that, then I'm leaving this house!”

Tenchi cut his words short and caught his breath.

“Emperor of Jurai. I’m sorry. But please, believe me. I haven't laid a finger on Ayeka, and I haven't made any promises. It’s not that I dislike her. But when I don't even know who I am myself, how can I possibly think about love or marriage? Please understand.”

“Lord Tenchi...”

Ayeka stared at Tenchi, stunned.

“How cruel... Was it a lie when you said you would protect me? Even though Ayeka adored you so... even though I thought only of you...”

Tears welled up in Ayeka’s eyes in an instant.

“Coward!”

Ayeka stood up and dashed away.

“Ayeka!?”

By the time the Emperor shouted, Ayeka had already pushed past the royal guards stationed at the doors of the main hall and run outside.

“That selfish girl!”

It was just as the Emperor stood up to chase after his daughter.

“Your Majesty, look out!!”

Simultaneous with a man's voice, a kitchen knife came whistling through the air. The Emperor spun around, but the blade slashed across his upper arm.

“Dear!”

As the horrified Empress started to rise, a voice rang out again.

“Everyone, get down!”

Without knowing what was happening, the group instinctively threw themselves to the floor. Before their eyes, the head of a man dressed in the uniform of a Juraian servant exploded. His body, still clutching another knife in his hand, took two or three steps before collapsing right in front of Tenchi.

“Who goes there!?”

Grand Commissioner Kuramitsu and the Galaxy Police detectives leaped up, brandishing their blasters. Naturally, Mihoshi and Kiyone moved to surround and protect the Emperor.

“Your Majesty! Are you injured?”

The royal guards came rushing in. Behind them appeared Pete, wielding an unfamiliar heat-gun type blaster.

“It is nothing serious. This man is one of my cooks. Why on earth...?”

The Emperor spoke while staring blankly at the headless corpse. Pete knelt over the body with a grim expression that made him look like a different person, then shook his head.

“Your Majesty. This man was being controlled. The thing possessing him has fled, but we don't know when it will reappear. Please be on your guard.”

“The thing possessing him? What was it?” the Emperor asked sharply.

“A type of malevolent spiritual entity. These kinds of spirits drift through space. Sometimes they find a suitable host to parasitize, and powerful ones can even manifest their own physical forms. Kagato was like that.[3]”

Pete looked up toward Tenchi.

“The one that possessed this man likely doesn't have that much power. You could call it an evil spirit. But it's a fast one. By the time I moved to pin it down, it was too late.”

Pete stood up, looking weary.

“Living opponents are easier. You just destroy the brain and that's it. This evil spirit has no form. If you don't anchor it the moment it attaches to someone's brain, it escapes. This man was a victim of circumstance.”

The Emperor looked away from the corpse. “Is this the work of the insurgents?”

“Most likely. No one can enter this place by normal means. So, they thought of this trick. Though the reverse is also possible. An evil spirit might have possessed the leader of the insurgents and sent a henchman here.”

Pete holstered his blaster and beckoned one of the royal guards.

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[3] This again doesn't seem to ever be touched upon outside of here.

“Sorry, but clean this up. There’s no more danger here. Nothing left to investigate.”

The young royal guard who had been summoned grew indignant.

“I have no reason to take orders from the Galaxy Police. Who are you? You aren't even a detective, are you?”

“Knock it off. This man is a Sensitive.”

At the Emperor’s words, the guard gasped.

“You...? The executioner's dog?”

The guard backed away with a look of disgust. *Sensitive*. They were called the hidden blades of the Juraian Royal Family, the Hounds of Death, yet almost no one knew the truth of them. Because—various rumors heard among his peers surfaced in the young guard's mind. The thing that came the moment after seeing a Sensitive's true form was death.

They had no families. Even if they had parents, they were separated the moment their abilities awakened and sent to a special training facility, never to meet again for the rest of their lives... because all affection was a hindrance to the mission. Naturally, they never fell in love; instead, they were drilled in psychology through rigorous simulations. Every emotion existed only to be exploited—to hunt and kill the enemy.

You dog of the executioners. You peeping tom. You're a monster with no emotion or warmth. Don't come near me. I haven't done anything wrong. No, don't think that. I'm in front of the Emperor. If he finds out I'm thinking this, my position as a guard is over. Hurry up and vanish. If you're a hound, then run off like one...

Pete’s lips twisted in a lonely grimace. Even without intentionally reading his mind, Pete understood the guard's thoughts perfectly.

I'm certainly hated.

Well, it can't be helped. He probably doesn't know there are oddballs like me, and most Sensitives are exactly the kind of people he thinks they are.

“It seems I'm being given quite a bit too much credit.”

At Pete’s words, the guard flinched and turned his face away to hide his agitation.

“Due to certain circumstances, I was away from the Juraian Royal Family for many years. Sensitives aren't just the executioners you're thinking of. They're just people who, like you, survived by honing the abilities they were born with. If you won't do it, I'll take care of it myself.”

Pete tore down a tapestry and covered the corpse.

“Grand Commissioner Kuramitsu. Please take Mihoshi and return home. Your Majesty, it would be best for you to return as well, taking the Empress and the young ladies. The Juraian Royal Palace is protected by a barrier. It is safe there.”

Tenchi started. “What about Ayeka?”

“I’ll go look for her!”

Mihoshi and Kiyone dashed off. Casting a glance at the two of them, Pete continued.

“Commissioner. For the time being, please send the media and the security guards home. Your Majesty, please take care of the others. The fewer sacrifices, the better. I apologize for saying so, but neither the security guards nor the royal guards will be of any use.”

The Empress, her face pale, pulled Sasami close. “What should we do?”

“We shall set up a barrier.” Pete approached the Empress to comfort her and whispered in a low voice. “I am aware of your power, Your Majesty. Rest easy. Once it is only the family, please seal the main hall. Can you maintain the barrier until Princess Ayeka returns?”

The Empress nodded. Pete left her side and bowed to the Emperor.

“Your Majesty. I will search for the creature. Ryoko, will you come with me?”

Pete grabbed the arm of Ryoko, who was about to raise a voice of protest, and pulled her close.

“I need your power. Not for the sake of the Juraian Royal Family. For the sake of the man you love.”

That whisper vibrated directly into Ryoko’s heart. Ryoko, who had been trying to shake off his arm, stopped moving for a moment.

“I’m going too.”

Washu, who had been watching the turn of events without a word until now, stepped forward.

“I’m this child’s mother. I’ll help.”

Pete stared at the face of the genius scientist as if appraising her.

“I’ll take you up on that. You are... no, never mind.”

Pete looked down at Washu’s face for a moment as if puzzled, but eventually gave a bright smile, took her hand, and whispered.

“I’m grateful, Professor.”

The three of them—Pete, Ryoko, and Washu—left the main hall.

Tenchi stood there, watching the chaos in the hall as requests for guests to evacuate, sharp orders to subordinates, and demands for explanations flew back and forth. He was helpless.

An evil spirit?

A Sensitive?

In his confused mind, the word "insurgents" flashed. *If I were a terrorist, I would wipe out the entire Juraian Royal bloodline*. Which meant... his life, his grandpa’s, and his father’s were also being targeted.

Tenchi suddenly realized he wasn't carrying any weapons. *What should I do...? At this rate, I'll just be a burden. I can't even protect myself, and if Sasami or the Empress are targeted...*

Tenchi remembered Tsunami. She had told him to believe in his own power. But how? He couldn't just call up that power at will. In fact, he didn't even know the method.

Tenchi made up his mind.

“Emperor of Jurai. Is there anything that can serve as a substitute for the Master Key? I don't want to be killed without even putting up a fight.”

“Tenchi!?”

The Emperor, who had been giving instructions to the captain of the guard, turned at the sound of that voice.

“Come here. There is something I wish to discuss.”

The Emperor turned back to the captain and issued a command with a stern face.

“Evacuate everyone via the transfer gate within the next ten minutes. As soon as that is done, you are to evacuate as well. Now, go!”

The Emperor turned on his heel, grabbed Tenchi’s arm, and pulled him behind a tapestry.

“There is something I must ask. You said you defeated Kagato. How did you defeat him? It couldn't have been the Master Key. This is a matter concerning the destiny of the Juraian Royal Family. If you are the person I suspect you are, the evil spirit’s target is not Ayeka, but you.”

The Emperor paused and stared intently at Tenchi.

“What do you mean?” Tenchi asked back, unable to gauge the Emperor's true intent.

“I mean whether or not you are a true Prince. But first, let me hear your story. Do you know of the spirit of Tsunami, the ship of the founder of our Juraian Royal Family?”

Tsunami? So it really is the power of the Royal Family?

Tenchi realized for the first time that he was being tested as the heir to the Jurai throne.

“Ayeka is gone!”

“Ayeka is gone!”

Mihoshi burst into the main hall—now occupied only by Tenchi and the others—her face deathly pale.

“What should we do? It looks like she ran away from home. Ohhh, it’s my fault. If only I had been careful, this wouldn't have happened...”

“Her formal Jurai attire was found discarded in her room. It seems she left in her everyday clothes.”

Kiyone, who entered a moment later, added with a composed face.

“Find her!!”

The Emperor nearly jumped out of his seat.

“She’s on foot. She couldn't have gone that far yet. Bring her back!”

After shouting, the Emperor realized he was giving orders to Galaxy Police detectives.

“...I beg of you.”

Kiyone and Mihoshi exchanged a glance for a moment. The Emperor of Jurai, who was said to have lived for two thousand years and was known by everyone in the universe, was still a parent.

But Kiyone had to speak.

“The car that was at the house is missing.”

Kiyone began to speak in a voice she strove to keep calm.

“She likely isn't in this area anymore. Your Majesty. We are bound by Galaxy Police law. To go outside the special protected field, we need permission from the Council.”

When Kiyone took a breath, Grand Commissioner Kuramitsu interrupted.

“This is an emergency. We will apply special laws. Mihoshi. Detective Kiyone. Search for Princess Ayeka. I will request backup from the Solar System branch.”

“But, Commissioner. The Special Protection Treaty...”

Commissioner Anderson showed signs of panic. No matter if she was a princess of the Juraian Royal Family, making such a massive move would invite chaos not just to this land, but to the entire Earth. But who would persuade the Emperor when his daughter's life was at stake?

“I’ll go!”

Tenchi’s voice pulled him out of his internal conflict.

“This happened because of me. If I hadn't said something so thoughtless, Ayeka would...”

“No, Tenchi,” the Emperor interrupted. “Your attitude was admirable. That selfish girl simply took it to heart on her own. I apologize.”

“Dear, how can you... the child is all alone, without a ship or any attendants.” The Empress instinctively grabbed her husband’s arm.

“Tenchi. I cannot let you go.” The Emperor looked at Tenchi with a stern face. “You said that in the battle with Kagato, you used the Light Hawk Sword. And that you still do not know the technique to summon or control it.”

Tenchi was startled. He realized why the Emperor had said he wanted to talk and had questioned him in detail about the battle with Kagato.

“The Light Hawk Sword is the strongest technique of the Juraian Royal Family. It is a sword that draws energy from the universe via Tsunami, the spirit who is the king of all ships. There is no medium like the Master Key needed. The blood of the one chosen by prophecy acts as the key to draw out that power.”

The Emperor held his hand over Tenchi’s forehead and chanted something in the ancient tongue of the Juraian Royal Family. Suddenly, the mark of Tsunami surfaced on Tenchi’s forehead.

“Prince. You can feel it, can’t you? Our blood connection. If you go outside this barrier and are controlled by the evil spirit, you will destroy our entire clan.”

“I will...”

The Emperor lowered his hand. Along with it, the mark on the forehead vanished.

“The Light Hawk Sword possesses enough power to slice a ship in half, even within Kagato’s energy-neutralizing field. If used without control, it would destroy even this planet. Tenchi—no, Prince. For the sake of the Juraian Royal Family, I must protect you.”

The Empress looked up sharply. “Dear! What about Ayeka...?”

“In this country, it seems those who reach twenty years of age are considered adults. Excluding the time she slumbered within Ryu-Oh, Ayeka is exactly twenty. That girl is no longer a child. She must take responsibility for her own actions. All the more so if she is the First Princess of Jurai.”

The Emperor looked toward the firmly closed doors of the main hall.

“...Even if she returns, I might not be able to welcome her back. I do not know how great the power of that evil spirit is, but a lost and troubled heart is easy prey.”

A shadow of silence fell. No one said a word. No, they couldn't speak.

Ayeka, who had run out alone, carrying anger and sadness. The image of her being controlled by an evil spirit, her mind devoured until she was transformed, surfaced vividly in their minds. All they could do now was pray. Pray that the wicked spirit would not find its sacrifice. Pray to the gods who rule this universe for the protection of the Princess.

“I’m going,” Mihoshi said as she stepped forward quietly. “Ayeka is my precious friend. With the Goddess of Luck and my own intuition, I’m sure I’ll find her. Right, Kiyone?”

Kiyone couldn't answer immediately. Because she knew the Princess's latent abilities. The ability to manipulate shockwaves with her bare hands. If she

were already controlled by an evil spirit, a blaster would be useless. If she took a shockwave head-on, both she and Mihoshi would be obliterated in an instant.

Mihoshi must know that too...

Mihoshi approached and gently touched Kiyone's arm.

"See ya. Kiyone, that scarf is beautiful."

Mihoshi looked at Kiyone's lavender-colored scarf and gave a bright smile. Her eyes seemed to be saying: *It suits you well. Kiyone, you listened to my advice for the first time.*

"Wait!" Kiyone grabbed Mihoshi's arm and instinctively held her back. "'It's beautiful' my foot! Do you intend to go alone? You can't do anything without me! Besides, there isn't a single person who calls their senior '-chan'. What gives!? After you called me a heartless person!"

If she didn't keep shouting like that, it felt like the tears would overflow.

"Now, Kiyone, calm down. I made it back alive from Kagato's ship, didn't I? I didn't think for a second that I might not be able to return. I believe. I believe that God wouldn't take Ayeka away from us. Even when Tenchi was gone, I believed somewhere in my heart. He's a Prince of Jurai, so I knew he'd surely, surely come back..."

Mihoshi peered into Kiyone's face. "And that's exactly what happened, right?"

Kiyone bit her lip and forced down the lump in her throat.

Mihoshi is such a hopeless optimist. Do you really think I'd let you go alone!?

Kiyone blinked, remaining silent for two or three seconds until she had the resolve not to let her voice tremble and ruin the moment. Then, she looked up and smiled with the face of a senior detective.

"Mihoshi. You're forgetting the basics of investigation. The only time you're allowed to act alone is when you're going back to the dorm. We're a duo, aren't we? We go together. I swear it by the God of the Galaxy Police!"

Mihoshi looked at Kiyone's face and realized it was useless to say anything more.

“Well then!”

Kiyone really never listens to what I say.

“Mihoshi!!”

“Yeah...” Mihoshi gave in. “I swear it by the God of the Galaxy Police!”

The two smiled at each other, clapped their hands together with a sharp pop, and turned toward Grand Commissioner Kuramitsu.

“First Class Detective Mihoshi!”

“Likewise, First Class Detective Kiyone! We are beginning the investigation immediately!”

The two gave a sharp salute and began walking toward the sealed doors.

Suddenly, Sasami burst into tears. “What about Ryo-Ohki? Where is Ryo-Ohki?”

Sasami buried her face in the Empress’s chest and sobbed. “Everyone is leaving. Leaving Sasami behind.”

“That’s not true, Sasami.” The Empress hugged Sasami and stroked her slender shoulders. “Your mother is here. Your father, too. Ayeka will return. There's no way she'd be possessed by an evil spirit!”

Mihoshi placed her hand on the door of the main hall and glanced back over her shoulder. Here, too, were people who, while feeling like they were clinging to a hope, still believed in God.

“Sasami. Wait for us. It’s okay. Your sister is safe.”

Mihoshi left, leaving behind a radiant smile. That brightness momentarily illuminated those who remained.

Ayeka was gripping the steering wheel, driving down the prefectural road dressed in the everyday clothes Mihoshi had—a sweater, a miniskirt, and a coat thrown over them. It wasn't the wagon they had all used to go to the hot

springs, but the white passenger car Tenchi’s father, Nobuyuki, usually used for work.

A white passenger car was a common sight. These clothes were also something Mihoshi had bought after coming here. There was no need to worry about appearing suspicious.

Ayeka had never driven a car before, but once she actually started moving, she found it wasn't that difficult. It was very similar to the racing machines used on planet Jurai. Ayeka had competed many times against the royal guards who were enthusiasts of such machines. Compared to those high-performance vehicles, the car she was driving now had duller reactions, which meant she didn't have to use as much nervous energy.

She had plenty of time to think. There was little traffic. Ayeka decided to turn off onto a side road and head toward the downtown district. Inside the glove compartment, there was a road map of Okayama Prefecture, work documents, and various other small items cluttered together. She had glanced at the map before starting and memorized what she needed, so there was no need to look at it again.

After her violent impulse had subsided, Ayeka’s heart felt as empty as the energy she had expended. She didn't want to stay there for another second. That thought drove her, yet in a corner of her mind, she had remained strangely calm; she had changed her clothes, searched for the car keys, and even checked her full reflection in a mirror before leaving.

Despite having the air conditioning on, Ayeka felt strangely cold.

No, that’s not it. I’m not cold. I feel... exposed.

Women of the Juraian Royal Family were expected to wear robes that reached their ankles. It was safe to say they almost never exposed their legs in public. Since she was sitting in the seat, Ayeka looked down at the miniskirt that cut off right at her thighs.

It feels quite strange. To think that simply baring my legs could make the shackles of a princess fall away.

Stockings are such odd things. It's as if they are shouting, "I am barefoot." I wonder if all the girls on Earth dress like this.

The image of Tenchi's face—clearly rejecting her in front of her father and mother—floated into Ayeka's mind. She tried to stir up her anger, but that violent emotion would no longer surface. Instead, a sinking sadness spread through her. The sadness rushed in silently like a tide, filling the vessel that was Ayeka and numbing her nerves.

Where should I go? Ayeka thought blankly.

Somewhere I can forget everything would be nice. My head feels so heavy; if I drink some alcohol, I'm sure I can forget it all.

The lights of the downtown district came into view. However, the shops didn't seem to be very open. Ayeka unconsciously pulled the car over to the shoulder and began walking through the town as dusk fell, repeating to herself with a hollow heart: *Why? Why is it so cold?*

Behind her, a shadow like a ghost wavered. The shadow followed from behind Ayeka, drifting along, and eventually stopped in front of a single shop. Ayeka and the shadow descended the dark stairs, their forms nearly overlapping.

Around the same time, Pete was walking through the mountain forest near the shrine, accompanied by Ryoko and Washu. As he walked, he cast a net of sensory waves in all directions, searching for traces of the evil spirit. Among those who had passed through the transfer gate, there had been no suspicious auras. That was only natural. After escaping, the evil spirit would surely diffuse itself to avoid its presence being read, waiting for another chance to possess someone.

Pete looked back toward the Masaki Shrine. The shrine was enveloped in a barrier like a blue aura. It was an energy barrier invisible to the humans of this planet, but visible to Ryoko and Washu.

That's why I brought these two along, Pete thought.

If there was an energy reaction not of this planet nearby, they would sense it sensitively. Neither of them—at least not Ryoko—was a Sensitive, nor did she have such abilities, but they were sufficient.

Ryo-Ohki followed along behind them with quick, small steps.

A living antenna, a computer unit, a storage device, and a high-speed regenerative growth unit. Summing up the parts of Washu's explanation that were easy to understand, that was what she was. A living spaceship. He had been told she could transform from this cat-rabbit form into a massive spaceship in an instant. The energy required for such a transformation would likely be equivalent to a small supernova. She probably drew energy from another dimension. The gems on Ryoko's wrists were also apparently a type of energy conversion device.

Beyond that, Pete's mind was at a loss. However, he could say this much: if Washu was the one who created Ryoko and Ryo-Ohki, her technological level far surpassed the science of the current Galactic Union nations. The same could be said of the Juraian Royal Family's power, the Light Hawk Wings; both were identical in their inexplicability. Most life forms would call it the power of a god.

Pete's perspective hit closer to the mark. It was the existence of high-dimensional life forms that could move freely between this ten-dimensional universe. Washu was close to that. Ryoko was her dummy. He didn't have proof, but he had felt it when he nearly peered into Washu's heart.

This is not of this world.

Among evil spiritual entities, there were some close to that as well. Beings that existed across the walls of dimensions. To such things, normal laws of physics did not apply. But why was such a thing here? Pete felt that was like questioning God about the meaning of existence, and he gave up pursuing the answer.

At least these two were not enemies. They wouldn't turn into enemies—that is, their minds wouldn't be taken over. He had to be satisfied with that.

Though looking at these two who seem like young girls, they certainly don't look like such high-dimensional beings.

Pete stole a glance at Ryoko, who looked grumpy and bored with walking around, and Washu, who was observing the surroundings with a cool face.

I suppose I'm the same in that I don't look the part either. Many Sensitives were plain, reserved, and inconspicuous. Of course, that was what one should call a professional attitude. But even for "telepaths" (the boy Tenchi understood Sensitives as such), there were exceptions. When on the job, one's life was usually on the line, so there was no room for fooling around, but there was no need to look like one was chewing on a bitter bug all the time. If you did that, the girls would just run away. Someone like Mihoshi, for example.

Pete's thoughts strayed from work, and instead, Mihoshi's warm smile surfaced.

Mihoshi...

Your smile smells of the morning. A morning where I wake up and don't have to think with a bleak heart, "Ah, did I survive today? Will I survive until the next morning?" A morning with fresh coffee and a breakfast that isn't cereal. A morning where hearts communicate through a smile alone without saying a word. If that could be mine, I wouldn't mind quitting being a Sensitive.

Pete indulged in a fantasy unbecoming of a Sensitive, even as he heard the mocking laughter of his peers in his mind: *That's why you're second-rate*.

The mockery rose in undulating waves, turning into an unbearable feeling of discomfort.

At that moment.

Suddenly, an image of Ayeka pierced his mind. Ayeka walking with a hollow expression. The scenery of the street, and behind it, an abyss opening its mouth, ready to strike.

Dammit. The Princess...!

"Ryoko! Washu! Come here!" Pete shouted.

"What is it now? Did you find something?" Ryoko approached with a look of blatant annoyance.

“Princess Ayeka is in danger. I was tricked. The evil spirit isn't here. It's aiming to possess the Princess somewhere far away.”

“Tricked? What do you mean?”

“No, I underestimated its power. When it left this place, it set up an image as if it were hiding nearby. It must have been following the Princess all along. It’s waiting for a gap where it can transfer without using energy. It might have even guided the Princess to leave this place. I just felt it. It clearly revealed its will.”

Pete’s face distorted with anger and regret.

“It’s the city. Direction: Northwest. I saw lights and shop signs. Stairs descending to a basement. I don't know the rest. I can't stop it...”

Pete looked up. “Ryoko, won't you go? It might be too late already. But you're the only one who can chase an evil spirit.”

“Eh!?” Ryoko stared back at Pete, startled by the sudden request.

“Ryoko. Go on.” Washu stepped forward. “I don't have the power to fight an evil spirit right now. When I made you, I entrusted all such power to you.”

“Eh?” Ryoko was bewildered.

This person... what is this "Washu" person? Sometimes she says she made me, sometimes she says she's my mother.

“You don't need to know. You have your own role. If I told you, it would change the future. Everything would vanish. You, this universe, and Tenchi.” Washu smiled brightly. “Just kidding! No way that would happen. You need to be of some use to people. You've done enough bad things in your time.”

Ryoko and Pete both toppled over.

“...I feel like I'm the one who always gets the short end of the stick.”

Ryoko got up while rubbing her hip and glared at Pete. “I just have to bring that damn Ayeka back, right? Fine. I’m going!”

Ryoko thrust a fist toward Pete’s face and abruptly vanished.

“Honestly, I wonder who she takes after.”

Washu, who had been gazing at the space where Ryoko had vanished, began walking with a cool face. “Come on, let's go. We’re going to be busy from now on.”

Pete hurriedly followed, feeling strangely as if he had become one of Washu’s children himself.

In a dark shop with almost no customers, Ayeka sat silently holding a glass as it was filled to the brim with alcohol. The man sitting next to her was the one pouring. He was a middle-aged man who gave off an unpleasant feeling. His face... the impression of his face wouldn't stay fixed.

She felt like she had been sitting here for a long time, yet she had no memory of when this man had come to sit beside her.

It’s because I’m drunk. Ayeka finished the drink and set the glass down with a clatter.

“Young lady. You certainly can drink.” The man laughed. “Have another. Something bad happened, didn't it? I mean, coming to a place like this all alone.”

More alcohol was poured into the glass.

“Did your boyfriend dump you? What a fool, dumping a beautiful girl like you. Just talk about it. It’ll make you feel better, right? What’s your name, missy?”

“...Ayeka.” Ayeka grabbed the glass as if snatching it away and downed it in one go. “It doesn't matter, none of it. I came here to forget. My name, my house, everything.”

Yes, everything seems so far away. Lord Tenchi’s face looks distant. Father, Sasami, Mother.

It would be better to be even further away, Ayeka thought. *I want to be alone. I wish everyone would just disappear.*

Ayeka couldn't consider what that meant right now. Suddenly finding everything repulsive, she tried to stand up from her seat and swayed unsteadily.

“Whoa, careful there.” The man stood up quickly and supported Ayeka. “You’re drunk, aren't you? You should rest a bit. Let's go to a place a friend of mine owns. Can you walk?”

As he spoke, the man began walking toward the exit, dragging Ayeka along.

“Let go!” Frightened, Ayeka felt herself being dragged by some inexplicable force and tried desperately to resist the flow.

The inside of the shop flipped over. Ayeka was thrown against what had been a wall and saw the man looming over her. The man’s face was like a demon's. There was nothing human about it. Facing Ayeka behind a layer of skin was a hollow, empty thing.

Cold air began to seep from the man’s body.

This isn't a human. It's like Kagato, but different. It has no form. But it has terrifying power. A monster that eats people!? But why me? Don't tell me, my heart...?

By the time Ayeka realized it, it was already too late.

I'm going to strip you bare. The voice, mixed with grating noise, echoed doubly inside her head. *Your body, your heart, they must be delicious. You and I shall become one. Now, open your legs. Open your heart...*

“Stop it!”

A shockwave was released from the hands of the terrified Ayeka. At the same moment the man’s upper body exploded, a numbing cold air entered Ayeka’s momentarily vacant heart. Ayeka’s spirit lost consciousness and was placed in a frozen state, and the evil spirit’s consciousness covered every part of her active domain. Eventually, it reached her nervous system and gave new commands to her body.

The evil-spirit-possessed Ayeka floated lightly above the dead man, a smile of victory appearing on her face for an instant, before she vanished.

“Kiyone, can't you go any faster?”

“If I go any faster, the local police on this planet will catch us! It wouldn't even be funny if the Galaxy Police were arrested in the act by the local cops!”

Kiyone, in civilian clothes, shouted from the driver's seat of the borrowed wagon. “Besides, I don't even know where I'm going! I'm only driving because you said it's this way, that it's definitely this way.”

“But that’s just how I felt.” Mihoshi, also in civilian clothes, shrank back.

“I've been meaning to ask, but what on earth is your basis for that?” Kiyone turned her whole head toward Mihoshi and glared with a face that said she absolutely wouldn't look away until she got an answer.

“K-Kiyone, look out, the front, the front!”

“It’s fine! I could drive a thing like this with my eyes closed. More importantly, are you sure it's this way?” As she spoke, Kiyone noticed the headlights of an oncoming car and turned her face back to the front.

“Mmm... I don't know, but I have a feeling it's this way.”

Kiyone finally exploded. “We don't have time! What if Princess Ayeka is attacked while we're doing this? A Ouija board would be better than this. I’d hate to just bump into a princess possessed by an evil spirit while we're wandering around!”

“Even if you say that...” Mihoshi thought for a moment that she really should have left this one behind. “'Drive, drive,' my heart is telling me. 'Drive toward the lights of the city'...”

“Are you a moth!?” Kiyone slammed her fist against the steering wheel in her rage, and the car swerved for a second.

“N-never mind me, just drive...”

It was just as Mihoshi said that. Through the windshield of the wagon, they saw something unbelievable.

“Mihoshi... It's the Princess. The Princess is...”

Ayeka’s figure appeared in the headlights. Kiyone instinctively slammed on the brakes and turned the wheel the other way. A following car honked its horn as it passed the wagon, which had stopped almost scraping the guardrail.

Ayeka, floating in the air, looked at them as if mocking them and suddenly vanished through the windshield.

You lucky detectives.

The voice was Ayeka’s, but a freezing thought echoed directly in their minds and then departed.

Kiyone stared blankly into space for a while.

It’s no use. We can't stop it. We’ve lost.

Then, shaken by a strong force, Kiyone snapped back to her senses.

“What are you doing? We have to chase her! Tenchi and the others are in danger!!”

Mihoshi was looking at her with a serious face. There wasn't a trace of defeat in her voice.

“Right. That's right. We have to go back!”

Kiyone made a sharp turn and began driving back the way they had come.

I knew it, you're the best detective. Kiyone was amazed by Mihoshi’s resilience. She wasn't fazed by the evil spirit’s disruption at all. Kiyone’s original composure returned to her heart.

“Mihoshi, that thing has taken over the Princess. But not everything. There must be a reason. A reason why it wants to keep the Princess unharmed.”

Ryoko, having teleported near the city, heard Ayeka’s cry of terror within her heart and realized she was too late. The evil spirit had taken over Ayeka’s mind. Chasing it now would only make the opponent wary.

In that case, I'll just beat it to the punch, Ryoko thought.

Where it was going next was already decided. The main hall of Masaki Shrine. The evil spirit would surely come to wipe out the entire Juraian Royal bloodline.

“Tenchi!!” Ryoko screamed.

When the Ryu-Oh that Tenchi was on was pierced by the main cannon of the Soja and exploded. When she found the blood-stained hand towel Tenchi had wrapped around his forehead among the wreckage of the Ryu-Oh. Ryoko was remembering that bone-chilling terror from that time.

She never wanted to feel that way again. Whether it was Ayeka or an evil spirit, anyone who came near Tenchi would be killed. Ryoko, becoming a mass of murderous intent in her rage, teleported through space again.

Appearing in front of the main hall enveloped in the blue barrier, Ryoko was so panicked she forgot to guard her rear.

At that moment. A tremendous shockwave struck Ryoko. The shockwave was reflected by the barrier and slashed across Ryoko’s entire body doubly. A normal human would have been decomposed down to the molecular level. Before she could even stabilize her phase, Ryoko tried to escape by teleporting through space, but lost her strength and was slammed into the ground.

“What a fool.”

The voice echoed. The evil spirit looked down at Ryoko with Ayeka’s face and form.

“In that state, you can no longer fight. Even if you could, you are no match for me anyway.”

Ayeka floated lightly into the air and laughed with a face full of naked malice.

“Die. Just die. You are nothing but an energy conversion device anyway. Because you think you are alive, you are plagued by unnecessary emotions. Cast off that female form and return to your true self. I shall help you.”

Ryoko felt her body fading. The arm without the gem was vanishing. As she tried to leap up, she looked down at her legs; they had already vanished from

the knees down. She couldn't move like this. The arm she had pressed to the ground became translucent, and she saw the glow of the gems growing stronger.

It wasn't her will. The gems were trying to suck away her energy, her consciousness. A beast-like sound burst from Ryoko’s throat.

No.

This is a hallucination.

There’s no way Ayeka has this kind of power.

However, her vision was being closed off, her voice stolen, and she was actually losing her five senses. Ryoko gave a cry of terror within her consciousness.

“Tenchi! Help me... I’m going to disappear!!”

The gems are trying to consume me. The evil spirit that possessed Ayeka is trying to erase my consciousness and use my power.

Tenchi... help. Save me...!

“Ryoko!”

She thought she heard Tenchi’s voice. Tenchi was coming to save her. She could see him running. Ryoko tried to reach out an unmoving hand, but realizing the hand itself was vanishing, she was plunged into the depths of despair.

It was a hallucination. A vision created by her own desires. Tears overflowed from Ryoko’s invisible eyes.

How foolish, even though I can't see anything. Even though I can't hear anything.

It’s no use now... I’ve really lost my edge...

Suddenly, the image of Washu floated into her mind. In a place on some unknown planet, she was looking down at Ryoko, who had just been born. Two figures stood on either side of her.

One was Tsunami, the spirit who bore the name of the First Ship. The other was... an unfamiliar face. A gem set in her forehead. Translucent green eyes.

“I shall grant this one power,” Washu’s voice said.

“I shall give her a name,” Tsunami’s cool voice added.

“Then I shall give her a heart. So that one day, this one may know love and know what it means to protect,” the third said.

The three voices became one.

“Awaken, Ryoko. In the name of us, the three Goddesses.”

All of her senses returned in an instant. The Light Hawk Wings stood as a barrier between Ayeka and Ryoko. Within the dazzling radiance of those wings, a silhouette stood.

“Tenchi!!”

Noticing Ryoko’s voice, Tenchi looked back.

“Hurry, get inside the barrier of the main hall! That isn't Ayeka anymore. It can't pass through the barrier!”

“Do you think so?”

Ayeka drifted down from the air. Wearing a wicked smile, Ayeka approached Tenchi.

“Your precious Princess Ayeka is sleeping inside of me. I *am* Ayeka. This heart, this body—everything.”

Ayeka raised a hand and pushed Tenchi aside. The hand was warm, as if blood were truly flowing through it.

“Impossible...”

The glow of Tenchi’s Light Hawk Wings faded.

“Did you think I was some monster that simply devours people?” Ayeka turned toward Tenchi. “A monster wearing Ayeka’s skin? You know nothing. Not of my power, nor of the world of the stars. I am one who brings forth new power. A new power that is not bound by form.”

Ayeka’s hand passed through the barrier and pushed open the doors to the main hall.

“Wait!”

Tenchi chased after her as if spring-loaded. At that moment—

“Die, evil spirit!”

With a fierce shout, the Emperor of Jurai swung his sword down upon Ayeka’s head. Overlapping screams rose from inside the hall, and for an instant, Ayeka’s form vanished.

“Ayeka!”

Tenchi dashed into the hall and looked around. Ayeka was nowhere to be found. She had disappeared. Whether it was by the power of the Emperor’s Light Hawk Sword or the evil spirit’s own power, he could not tell.

“Emperor! Where is Ayeka!?”

The Emperor looked up, his face drained of color, and shook his head. Just then—

“To kill your own daughter, how tragic.”

A mocking voice echoed from mid-air.

“Emperor of Jurai. Is your own life so precious to you?”

Simultaneously, Ayeka’s form appeared above the two of them.

“If I hadn't teleported, the Princess would have been obliterated. Do you still not understand? I am the one protecting her heart and body. Emperor, if you

give me your life and the lives of your precious clan, I shall let the Princess live, unharmed. This body is fresh and beautiful. It is perfect for absorbing your power. However, your consciousnesses are a nuisance.”

The air around Ayeka wavered, and darkness appeared.

“Yes. Why don't you all die for a moment? It will make it easier to reconstruct you.”

The next instant, a terrifying mental force was released from Ayeka’s entire body. Rather than a blade of death, it was a power like a dark god that erased and swallowed everything—a frozen thought-wave of shadow.

Before that evil power, one by one, the lights of consciousness went out. Emperor Azusa. Empress Misaki. Grand Commissioner Kuramitsu and his subordinates. Even Tenchi’s own consciousness was on the verge of vanishing. The Light Hawk Wings had no power to block this mental intent. This was not a normal energy wave, nor was it the sensory wave that had attacked Ryoko.

“Guh...”

Even so, Tenchi desperately tried to resist. Anger kept the last light of his consciousness burning. He focused his will into the Light Hawk Sword and prepared to strike at the darkness shaped like Ayeka.

“Get out of Ayeka! I won't let you have your way!!”

Ayeka seemed to smile faintly.

“Tenchi. You shall become my Prince. A Prince of Darkness.”

In the center of the darkness that seethed like a living creature, Ayeka wore a clearly malevolent grin. With those words, a terrifying cold enveloped Tenchi’s body, freezing his mind. At the same time, the light flickered and died from the Light Hawk Sword.

Mihoshi and Kiyone, having run up the shrine’s stone steps out of breath, realized as soon as they entered the grounds that something was wrong with

the main hall. Instead of a barrier, a shroud of darkness completely covered the building.

“Mihoshi!”

As Mihoshi tried to dash forward, a pale-faced Pete blocked her way as if he had been waiting.

“Don't go. Even if you do, there’s nothing we can do. This isn't just an evil spirit. It is darkness itself. Don't you feel it? This horrific mental pressure.”

Kiyone leveled her blaster and placed her other hand on Mihoshi’s shoulder.

“We’re going. We aren't Sensitives. We can get in.”

“You’ll only be erased. The minds of those inside have almost vanished. Soon, this place too will be consumed by the darkness. You must teleport through this gate. I’m going too. If I can gather the other Sensitives, we might be able to seal it. Or perhaps through some physical method. We need someone to sound the warning. There’s no point in waiting here to be swallowed up.”

“No, I’m going. Tenchi is in there. Grandpa too. They haven't just vanished. I want to save even one person.” Mihoshi pulled out her blaster. “I’m a detective. I won't run away just because there’s no way. You be the one to give the warning.”

Mihoshi looked at Pete and smiled brightly.

“I think I can at least distract the spirit. Besides, I believe in Tenchi’s power.”

“.....”

A fierce conflict played across Pete’s face.

Don't go! If you go, you’ll be killed before you can even make a sound. You’ll be obliterated. You aren't like the royalty in there. It’s a meaningless death.

But for some reason, the words that were at the tip of his tongue couldn't be spoken in the face of Mihoshi’s smile. Words meant nothing.

Mihoshi. I... honestly, I want to snatch you away and run from this place. Even by force. If I could, I would have done it long ago!

Pete looked down, biting his lip hard. Kiyone spoke up as if to comfort him.

“Pete. Don't blame yourself. We’re going of our own free will. But I must say, it was a surprise to find out you were a Sensitive. What a shame. I was looking forward to hearing all sorts of interesting stories.”

Then, an angel whispered in his ear.

“Will you pray to the God of the Galaxy Police?”

Pete looked up in surprise. Mihoshi’s blue eyes, reflecting the sky, were peering into his own. Pete couldn't say a word; he simply took Mihoshi’s hand and squeezed it firmly. Watching this, a gentle smile—a rarity for her—appeared on Kiyone’s cheeks.

“Come on, Mihoshi. Let’s go.”

Mihoshi nodded and turned on her heel. Pete watched the two of them go in silence, then abruptly turned and started walking toward the transfer gate.

I really was a second-rate Sensitive, Pete thought gloomily. *Not just a second-rate Sensitive, but a second-rate man. She’s a first-rate detective. She’s too bright for someone like me. It’s a joke. A second-rate Sensitive falling for a first-rate detective...*

Pete stood at the entrance of the transfer gate, but unable to take a step forward, he looked back at the main hall.

“Dammit! What’s the fun in being the only one alive!?”

Pete turned back and chased after the two of them.

Anyone who tries to steal Mihoshi’s radiant smile—I’ll kill them! I can at least manage to blow Ayeka’s head off. At this point, the Juraian Royal Family and oaths of loyalty don't matter. Let’s go down fighting!

He stepped into the darkness.

With a loud *bang*, the doors to the main hall burst open, and Mihoshi, Kiyone, and Pete tumbled in, splitting to the left and right.

“Evil spirit! Prepare yourself!!”

Kiyone fired a rapid succession of blaster shots at Ayeka, who had turned around in the center of the hall. The blaster bolts were blocked by Ayeka’s barrier and didn't even graze her.

“Tenchi, hang on!”

While pulling up Tenchi, who had collapsed on the floor, Mihoshi checked his pulse.

He’s alive. He’s just unconscious.

Thinking this, she searched her clothes for something to wake him up.

“Aww. I left everything in my uniform pockets!”

“More detectives. Have you no sense, coming back here again?”

Ayeka fired a shockwave at Kiyone. Kiyone dodged at the last second.

“Move. Do not interfere.”

Ayeka grabbed Mihoshi by the shoulder and tossed her lightly toward the wall. Mihoshi hit the wall hard and crumbled to the floor, unconscious.

“Take this!”

With a shout, Pete’s heat-gun beam struck Ayeka’s head directly.

“Fool. I can read everything a second-rate Sensitive like you tries to do.”

Wrapped in a cylindrical barrier, Ayeka turned around slowly, completely unharmed.

“You are an eyesore. Before I erase the detectives, I shall erase you. I’ll give you a death befitting a Sensitive. Blow your own brains out.”

A loathsome sensory wave that felt like it was tightening around his entire body emanated from Ayeka. Pete’s hand began to rise against his will. The muzzle of the gun slowly began to turn toward himself.

It’s no use. The opponent’s power is too strong; I can't guard against it.

The finger on the trigger cramped. The muzzle of the blaster trembled as it turned toward Pete's forehead like a sentient creature, its dark mouth opening wide.

It's no use. I can't win. It's almost over. When this thing barks, my existence will vanish. Just like I've done to so many permanent criminals in the past.

Pete prepared for death.

I'm sorry, Mihoshi... I couldn't be of any use to you... or to anyone else...

Pete closed his eyes.

No one saw the shadow that slipped like a ghost from behind the wide-open doors. The lithe, cat-like silhouette vanished once, then materialized suddenly beside Tenchi, picking up his frozen body.

"Tenchi! I'm giving you my energy! Wake up!!"

It was Ryoko. Clad in her battle suit, Ryoko hugged Tenchi tight, pressing her forehead to his, and funneled her energy into him. Ayeka turned with a terrifying expression, then vanished. The sensory wave abruptly snapped away from Pete, freeing his hands.

"So you've come, Ryoko. Meddling as always..."

With that voice, Ayeka materialized beside the two of them.

"The Prince could have been spared the pain if he had remained asleep. But it cannot be helped. I shall fuse with him while he is still alive. Watch closely and see how much agony is wrought when your consciousness is devoured!"

Ayeka's hair spread out as if standing on end.

"Get away, Ryoko!!"

Ayeka's hand—or rather, a darkness shaped like a hand—reached for Tenchi's forehead.

"I'm not moving!"

Ryoko raised her glowing arm and grabbed that hand. For a split second, the gems emitted a tremendous light, and then they shattered. In the wake of that impact, Tenchi snapped back to consciousness. At that moment, Ryoko's body, having lost all its energy, collapsed before Ayeka.

"Ryoko!!"

the Light Hawk Sword returned to Tenchi's hand. Simultaneously, all stray thoughts vanished from within him.

"Hyaaaaaah!"

With that, Tenchi leaped and swung the Light Hawk Sword down from above Ayeka.

"Impossible!"

The evil spirit realized it had underestimated this boy. There was no hesitation. He was like light itself. A light that pierced the darkness and raced through it.

At this rate, I'll be annihilated—

In the instant the evil spirit tried to flee from Ayeka's body, the Light Hawk Sword sliced through the darkness. The light and dark cancelled each other out with all the energy they possessed, and then...

Silence returned. The Light Hawk Sword vanished from Tenchi's hand. Without even noticing, Tenchi quietly knelt and picked up Ryoko's body. Her body was cold. Scarring from shockwaves was etched across her entire form.

"Ryoko."

He couldn't find any more words. Tenchi hugged Ryoko's body, his shoulders trembling.

What was the point of any of this? Ryoko, Ayeka... everyone is dead. No one survived. Only I am left alive like this. Why? What for?

"It is too early to despair."

Washu’s dignified voice echoed.

“Prince of Light. You did well.”

Tenchi looked up in confusion. Washu, holding Sasami and accompanied by Ryo-Ohki, was illuminated by the moonlight streaming through the open doors.

“The evil spirit has vanished. Everyone’s frozen hearts will soon return to normal.”

“Ayeka. What about Ayeka?” Tenchi looked toward Ayeka, who lay as if dead.

“She’s fine. That thing truly intended to use this body, so it kept it protected and unharmed. It might take a little time for her to wake up. But she will, surely.”

Washu looked down at the sleeping Sasami in her arms with a smile. “I protected this one. She is a child who will inherit Tsunami’s power, but she is still young.”

“Tsunami? Isn't the Light Hawk Sword Tsunami’s power?”

Washu set Sasami down gently, approached Tenchi, and placed a finger on his forehead.

“You do not need to know yet. Not until the time truly comes for you to awaken.”

Washu turned her gaze away and stared at Ryoko, who was cradled in Tenchi’s arms.

“What a foolish child. But she was magnificent.”

Ryoko’s body left Tenchi’s hands and floated into the air.

“I shall call her back now.” Washu reached out both hands and cried out, “Come forth! Power! Along with the one who named thee and the one who gave thee a heart!”

Two beautiful women appeared on either side of Washu. One was Tsunami; the other was an unknown woman.

“Washu. Tsunami. Tokimi. In the true names of the three Goddesses, return from the gap of darkness!!”

Ryoko’s body was enveloped in a dazzling light. Her lips parted, and she gasped as she took her first breath. Her chest began to rise and fall slowly. Still wrapped in light, Ryoko descended gently, and the glow returned to the gems on her wrists.

Tenchi watched this unbelievable sight without blinking, holding his breath. Someone’s warm fingers gently touched his forehead.

“Forget. Everything you have just glimpsed. It is still too early. While you are still a Prince.”

Tenchi’s eyes closed naturally. A peace like that of an infant cradled in its mother’s breast washed over his entire body.

I can sleep now. The spirits have healed everything.

Washu. Tsunami. And... Tokimi.

Wait? What am I saying? Washu is a genius scientist. She’s Ryoko’s mother... Tsunami is the spirit of the ship. But Ryoko... Ryoko? What happened to Ryoko?

Now that I think about it, an evil spirit possessed Ayeka... and I defeated it. With Tsunami’s power, the Light Hawk Sword. I feel like there was someone else there. A gem on her forehead. Translucent green eyes.

Huh? Was it a dream? Oh well. I’ll probably remember when I wake up. Until then... in this warm darkness...

Tenchi woke up in his own bed. He felt as though he had slept deeply for the first time in a while. Inside the blankets, Tenchi stretched his body with a long yawn, then suddenly snapped his eyes wide open. Someone was next to him. Furthermore, it was a woman. Tenchi fearfully lifted the covers and was struck speechless.

“Ryoko!!”

At that voice, Ryoko woke up.

“Tenchiii.”

Ryoko smiled brightly, wrapped her arms around Tenchi’s neck, and pulled him toward her.

“Kiss me.”

T-This is crazy! This is a dream. It has to be!

“W-Wait!”

Tenchi forcibly pried Ryoko’s arms off him, threw back the blankets, and leaped out of bed.

“I won't wait.”

Ryoko pulled on Tenchi’s arm.

“Ryoko, wait. Waah!”

Losing his balance, Tenchi tumbled right on top of Ryoko. At that exact moment—

“Good morning~!”

Along with a remarkably cheerful duet, the door banged open.

“Tenchi, how are you... Oh my goodness!!”

Mihoshi and Kiyone stood there holding hands in a pose hardly becoming of detectives.

“What is it? What on earth are you 'oh my-ing' about?”

From behind the two of them, Ayeka poked her head out and saw what they had seen.

“Kyaaaaaa!”

Ayeka pushed Mihoshi and Kiyone aside and climbed onto the opposite side of the bed.

“Lord Tenchi! What on earth is the meaning of this!? Please explain yourself properly so that I may be convinced! Why, why is this monster woman here!?”

“What? What's all the racket?”

Nobuyuki emerged from the adjacent room and peered into Tenchi’s room.

“Oh...”

The father’s face involuntarily broke into a smirk.

“Hey, Grandpa! Come here quick! If you don't see this now, you might not see it again in your lifetime! Tenchi and Ryoko are naked and...”

“Hmm? What about Tenchi and Ryoko?”

Katsuhito, coming out of the second-floor restroom, strode into Tenchi’s room. Before anyone could stop him, he flipped up the blanket covering the pair’s lower halves.

“What's this? They're both wearing underwear. How boring.”

Saying only that, Katsuhito strode back out again.

“Big Brother Yosho! How vulgar! Since when did you develop such a personality!?”

Ayeka’s screaming voice, her face red to her ears, chased after his retreating back.

“Ayeka. What are you doing? Your father has been calling for you for some time.”

The Empress of Jurai, Misaki, and the Emperor of Jurai, Azusa—who had finally run out of patience—came up the stairs.

“What is this commotion? Where is Ayeka?”

The two peered into Tenchi’s room and immediately stood frozen in silence.

“Emperor. Regarding the future schedule...”

Grand Commissioner Kuramitsu, Chief Anderson, and Section Chief Nobeyama came bustling up the stairs with documents in hand. They similarly fell silent,

and in the middle of rushing back down the stairs, they collided with Pete, who was just coming up.

“Pete. You mustn't look. No, you mustn't interfere.”

“Eh? At what? With whom?”

Pete rushed up the stairs as if flying.

“It’s a misunderstanding!!”

Tenchi’s scream pierced the ears of Washu, who was looking up at the ceiling in the first-floor living room.

“I didn't do anything! I didn't do anything shameful!!”

“What's 'shameful'?”

Sasami, who was eating a mandarin orange next to her, looked up at Washu’s face.

“It's fine, it's fine, Sasami-chan. You just be a good girl here by Washu’s side.”

“That’s weird. Sasami isn't a child anymore, you know.”

Sasami pouted and quickly snatched away the carrot Ryo-Ohki was eating.

“Right? At least give me an answer. Right, Ryo-Ohki-chan?”

“Myaaa!!”

Ryo-Ohki’s eyes welled up as she raised a voice of protest.

“Man, that was a surprise.”

Nobuyuki came down the stairs, and upon finding the two girls and the creature, he sat down on the opposite sofa with a heavy sigh.

“Washu-san. If a girl is born, how about the name 'Achika'?”

“A girl? What's that?”

Sasami leaned forward. Nobuyuki saw the look in Washu’s eyes and realized his slip of the tongue.

“Oh, Sasami-chan. Achika is Tenchi’s mother’s name. She was Grandpa’s daughter, and a very beautiful person...”

“Was? Does that mean she’s Sasami’s niece? Where is she now?”

Nobuyuki, feeling relieved in his heart, beckoned Sasami over, took her onto his lap, and began to speak.

“That person is high, high up in the sky now, where many flowers bloom and little birds sing.”

“I know! You mean the Heavenly Plain near the Royal Palace of Jurai! Wait, that's strange...”

“Shall I tell you another story? Once upon a time, there were an old man and an old woman. The old man went to the mountains to cut wood, and the old woman went to the river to wash clothes...”

Washu smiled faintly.

I feel like I might have erased everyone's memories a bit too much. Oh well. This kind of peace suits this tiny world in Okayama best.

Listening to Nobuyuki tell the tale of "Momotaro," Washu eventually drifted off into a doze.

And outside the Masaki residence...

Standing side by side and acting as gateposts, Ayeka’s guardians, Azaka and Kamidake, were enjoying a leisurely chat.

“Come to think of it, we didn't have a turn to appear this time.”

“True. It's so peaceful, we've surely been forgotten.”

“So everyone is busy enough to forget us, then?”

“It seems so. Thanks to that, we can have a relaxed talk like this.”

“I wonder what everyone is so busy with.”

“Indeed. I can hear quite a commotion coming from the second floor. But isn't that just the usual?”

“The usual?”

“Indeed. It's that. Look, Princess Ayeka and Ryoko-san are...”

“With Tenchi-san...”

The commotion could still be heard, but Azaka and Kamidake’s conversation shifted to the professional baseball and grand sumo wrestling they read about in the newspaper every morning. The chatter of the two entities was absorbed into the brilliantly clear sky, seemingly without end.

〈 *Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki* /A Flood of Customers: "Hexagram of Love" - End 〉

Afterword

Nice to meet you. I am Hasegawa, the scriptwriter for the OVA *Tenchi Muyo!* episodes one through six. *Tenchi* has now successfully become a book. For me, this is my first novel. (To be able to publish a book with Fujimi Shobo, the same publisher as the *Dragonlance* series... I am deeply moved!)

Thinking back, many things happened. When I joined the *Tenchi* project as the scriptwriter at the end of the year before last, the original drafts by director Hiroki Hayashi and chief animation director & character designer Masaki Kajishima were already completed. For the first episode, even the storyboards were done. So, while performing the joke-like task of creating a script from storyboards, the author thought: *What on earth is going to happen from here on out?*

In fact, from the second episode through the final episode of the scenario work, things didn't go exactly according to the original draft. After much back and forth, it came together in the form you all know, but within that process, there were various "unknown stories," "actually it was like this stories," and "backstory setting stories." In the novel, while picking up those bits, I intended to write a romantic comedy that was fun to read above all else (mixing in the author’s own sentiments).

If you finished reading and thought, "Isn't the protagonist Tenchi way too pathetic?", well, a person's born character doesn't change that easily. If you wondered, "Why are Ayeka and Ryoko always fighting like that?", don't you think something ominous would happen if those two became friends? If you thought Mihoshi is just too lucky, that is solely because the author deeply loves Mihoshi, and there might have been some unfairness in the distribution of affection. (Because of that, Ayeka ended up in a pitiful state.)

To the new characters, Kiyone-chan and Pete-kun: thank you for stirring up the story. I learned very well what kind of results a mere whim can bring about. Of course, the author, who writes almost entirely on whims and the pleasure of the narrative, is the most to blame... (People call this a "personality that thinks about absolutely nothing.")

Therefore, I would like to take this opportunity to write words of thanks to the people who helped me, which can only be written in an afterword.

Director Hiroki Hayashi: thank you for the wonderful illustrations. This person can draw, has talent, and is knowledgeable about music; if only his personality didn't resemble Mihoshi's, he would be a very blessed individual.

Chief Animation Director, Character Designer, & Original Creator Masaki Kajishima: sorry for bothering you with various questions while you were busy with the final episode. I'll reveal one little secret here...

When the novel was in its latter half, a single illustration was sent to me. On the illustration were the profiles of the Emperor of Jurai, Azusa; the Empress, Misaki; and a woman labeled "Great Mother, Tokimi"...

Hasegawa: “Kajishima-sensei, what is this 'Great Mother, Tokimi'?” Kajishima: “Oh, this? This is a goddess. There are three goddesses in this universe; Tsunami, Tokimi, and Washu are the goddess trio.” Hasegawa: “Eh...? (I know Tsunami, but this is the first I've heard of Tokimi. And Washu too? Wasn't Washu a genius scientist??)” … The author turned pale.

Hasegawa: “I've already written half the novel. Is that 'trio' thing really true?” Kajishima: (Firmly) “It’s true!” Hasegawa: “...Is that so? (I didn't know that at all.)” Kajishima: “It is!!” Hasegawa: “..... (This is bad. What do I do for the second half!?)”

It was the same during the scenario work, but Kajishima-sensei! Thank you for always giving advice that turns the world upside down. Thanks to you, I have learned the absurdity of God. Well, come to think of it, he is the person who created the *Tenchi* world, so it's no wonder he knows everything...

Lastly, to Editor-in-Chief Yasuda-san and editor Moriyama-san, who gave me the opportunity to write this novel: thank you truly for your help. Hearing fun stories from you—like the one about the dental treatment turning into a splatter movie after a molar was dug up, or the one about being strangled by a living ghost—the author hardly felt alive. (Right, Moriyama-san?)

And to all the readers: a sequel for the OVA has been decided, and the world of *Tenchi* will continue. I hope you enjoy it more and more.

May 1993 Naoko Hasegawa